TONY HAWK ON Wii >> **WIN AN XBOX 360 & GAMES!**
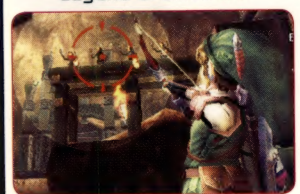
HYPER »

PLUS: E3 EYE-CANDY GALLERY

E3 HANDS-ON

PlayStation 3

Nintendo Wii

WE PLAYTEST **SONY** & **NINTENDO'S** NEW SYSTEMS AS THE NEXT GEN CONSOLE WAR HEATS UP

Legend of Zelda **Wii**

Heavenly Sword **PS3**

Super Smash Bros Brawl **Wii**

Gran Turismo HD **PS3**

Super Mario Galaxy **Wii**

PREVIEW
ALONE IN THE DARK
The original returns

MASSIVE FEATURE

SEGA JAPAN

Sonic comes to PS3 and 360!

NEXT-GEN HITS!

Virtua Fighter 5
Super Monkey Ball
Phantasy Star Universe
Virtua Tennis 3

Reviews
• 99 Nights **360**
• Guitar Hero **PS2**
• Hitman Blood Money **PC.XBOX**

• NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. **DS**

NEW DEPTHS OF STRATEGY
NEW HEIGHTS OF GLORY

The new era of strategy games has arrived.
Dive into the authentic "deep fantasy" universe of this genre-defining
series with stunning next-generation 3D visuals, groundbreaking
strategic combat, innovative multiplayer features,
and addictive RPG elements

HEROES V
OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

One night in a small
town of Washington, four
friends gathered, as
they often did, to talk
and play games. On this
particular night however
a dream was planted in
their hearts when one of
the friends suggested
that they make games of
their very own... More
than 10 years on and
this circle of friends
are the creators of
the world's largest
publisher of hobby games
Wizards of the Coast.

Founded in 1990 by Peter Adkison, Wizards of the Coast took on an entirely new game genre in 1993 with the release of the Magic: The Gathering trading card game. Created by Richard Garfield, a mathematician and award-winning game designer, Magic is the premier trading card game. Today, with an estimated fan base of more than seven million players, the Magic game is played in social and competition settings in more than 52 countries worldwide. There are over 80,000 official tournaments held each year, with the prize money available to be won each year totaling over US$3 million.

The Magic game made its debut at the GenCon game fair in August 1993.

Creator Richard Garfield called his game "Mana Flash!" and publisher Wizards of the Coast renamed it to Magic: The Gathering

The first Magic game released by Wizards of the Coast was referred to as "Alpha."

Wizards of the Coast has released more than 6,300 distinct Magic cards and 34 different Magic card expansion sets since the Magic game was first published. Today, there are several billion Magic cards in circulation across the world.

Magic Globally

There are more than six million Magic players in 70+ countries.

The Magic game is currently available in nine languages, including Chinese (traditional and simplified), English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese and Korean. Over the years, the Magic game rules have been translated to 19 different languages, among them Arabic, Greek, Hebrew and Latin.

The reigning Magic World Champion is Katsuhiro Mori from Japan.

Magic Tournaments

Official Magic tournaments have been hosted by all seven continents – Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, South America and even Antarctica, where a U.S. Army base hosted a Magic tournament.

The best Magic players in the world compete on the Magic: The Gathering Pro Tour™. Each year, the Magic Pro Tour awards more than $3 million in prize money.

NTENDO Wii HANDS-ON
tendo turn their booth over to a
cous bunch of journos for some
ality time with their new system...

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GUITAR HERO review

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Reviews

SUBSCRIBE AND WIN AN XBOX 360 & GAMES ON PAGE 18!

EDITORIAL

>> Wow. Well now that the dust has settled on E3, it's clear not only that we're back to a three horse race thanks to Nintendo Wii's dominance at the show, but also that Sony have a lot of work to do. Come the launch of the PS3 in November, Sony will be going up against the Xbox 360 with a large selection of quality titles already under its belt, and a number of killer second generation titles – Gears of War and Forza 2 to name a couple, hitting store shelves. Not only that but the cost of the console ($829 for the 20GB model and $999 for the 60GB model) is frankly ridiculous, and will make both the Xbox 360 and the Wii look incredibly attractive.

While Sony have stripped out features from the machine – say goodbye to twin HDMI outputs (you won't even get one with the 20GB model) and a number of the other ports, that wouldn't be such a problem if they came out with a killer lineup of titles. Unfortunately they didn't. Sony's pre-rendered hot air from last year's E3 proved to be just that, with no sign of Killzone 2 running in real time and most of the actual games looking on par with 360. While announcements like Final Fantasy XIII and Gran Turismo HD are important, it's going to be very interesting to see what Sony will actually have on sale on day one. Sitting alongside cheaper consoles – one much cheaper and packing the likes of Zelda and Metroid - Sony really need top tier titles to justify the price. Playback of an unestablished next gen DVD format and all the processing power in the world simply won't be enough.

Perhaps the most contentious announcement by Sony at the show was the motion sensing tech in the redesigned control pad. An obvious move to one up Microsoft and keep in line with Nintendo (albeit with quite a different approach), Sony simply couldn't back it up. There was only one game at E3 that utilised it, and with six months to launch that's a worrying sign that its inclusion has simply been a mad scramble since TGS. Hopefully it will come into its own, and at the expense of the rumble functionality it had better. Prove us wrong Sony, prove us wrong.

Cam Shea >> **Editor**

[up] Not pictured: the editor

HYPER CREW Monthly Top 5 Games

Cam Shea - Editor
1. New Super Mario Bros. – Nintendo DS
   "Head bopping good times are back and here to stay."
2. Guitar Hero – PS2
3. Loco Roco - PSP
4. Half-Life 2 - PC
5. Worms Open Warfare - PSP

Daniel Wilks - Deputy Editor
1. Guitar Hero - PS2
   "I bitched about the band until they crushed my sweet hands."
2. Oblivion – Xbox 360
3. Table Tennis - Xbox 360
4. Tetris DS - DS
5. Avoiding geek stink at E3

Malcolm Campbell - Art
1. Tomb Raider: Legend – PS2
   "Adventure! Searching for treasure! Awesome levels! Lace panties! Yay!"
2. Loco Roco - PSP
3. Me and My Katamari – PSP
4. Street Fighter Alpha Anthology – PS2
5. Guitar Hero – PS2

Eliot Fish - Writer
1. Shadowrun - SNES
   "I need to erase from memory the awfulness I saw at E3 this year..."
2. Dragon Quest VIII - PS2
3. Oblivion - Xbox 360
4. New Super Mario Bros. - Nintendo DS
5. Heroes of Might & Magic V - PC

consider studying for your degre

at the Australian Defence Forc

Academy (ADFA). ADFA is a campu

of the University of New South Wale

located in Canberra. Here you can ge

a degree in Engineering, Technolog

Science, Business or Arts and you'

also learn the leadership skills you'

need as an Officer in the Australia

Defence Force. There are all kinds

of Officer positions available from

Administration and Logistics through t

Aviation, Intelligence and Engineering

You could become a Marine Enginee

in the Navy, a Pilot in the Army, o

even an Air Defence Officer in the Ai

Force – there are dozens of exciting

Q. WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM YOUR UNIVERSITY?

A. RECOGNISED DEGREE
B. GUARANTEED JOB
C. GREAT SALARY
D. NO HECS
E. ALL OF THE ABOVE

positions open to you. If you decid

you want to become an Officer and

obtain a degree, ADFA is a great

way to make it happen. We'll pay

you over $18,900 per year whilst you

study, as well as taking care of all

your HECS fees, healthcare, most of

your textbooks and subsidise your

accommodation. Of course you will

then get paid a full Officer salary o

over $52,200 per year upon graduating

from ADFA and completion of your

specific employment training. And if

you are currently studying Year 11,

you could be eligible to apply for the

ADFA Education Award where the

top 120 applicants will be awarded

a laptop computer. So ask yourself

one question: will your university

provide you with the challenges and

responsibilities of leadership that only

ADFA can offer? You can learn more

about ADFA by calling 13 19 01, or visiting

www.defencejobs.gov.au/adfa

ADFA AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE ACADEMY

THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW SOUTH WALES

News >>

E3 2006

360 ANNOUNCEMENTS
Microsoft Tell Us Stuff

>> The Microsoft press conference at E3 this year yielded quite a few newsworthy nuggets. In terms of games, some of the more interesting title shown in demo or trailer form were Alan Wake, Fable 2, Gears of War, Crysis, Forza Motorsport 2, Shadowrun and Viva Piñata. Look out for more on most of those next issue. Oh, and of course there was the announcement everyone was expecting – Halo 3. Although it was only shown in the form of a game engine trailer, there's no doubt that it looks amazing, and we can't wait to find out more about the ominous proclamation at its conclusion... "this is how the world ends".

Bill Gates was on hand to talk about Live Anywhere, a system that will integrate your Xbox Live account in with your PC and mobile. One example given was sending a Forza 2 car to a friend's mobile. From there he can tune it on his phone, change the livery on his Vista PC then race it on his 360. Of course at a more basic level it will mean being able to invite friends into multiplayer games across multiple platforms and play certain titles

(Shadowrun for instance) with a mix of PC and 360 players, all with voice com. In short, you'll be able to use the one identity across all platforms, along with the one friends list, message center and marketplace.

Microsoft also talked up Live Arcade a lot, saying that it would be a breeding ground for independent developers. They may be right but there's bugger all evidence of that yet. Right now it's a breeding ground for crappy el cheapo puzzle games and ancient arcade titles. In any case, one new Live Arcade title that really taps into an expanded vision of Live was shown — Lumines Live. It was paired with a Madonna track, and through a partnership with Warner Music there'll be a whole host of exclusive music content you'll be able to play it with. The idea of customising and downloading a soundtrack from a

huge archive would be fantastic, but no confirmation on that just yet. Other than Lumines Live, it was just the usual suspects as far as Live Arcade goes. Sure, the likes of Pac-Man, Frogger, Contra, Sonic and Ultra Mortal Kombat 3 (to name a few) may be classics, but we want new content!

Microsoft also announced some new peripherals, including a wireless headset, a PC/Xbox 360 wireless force feedback steering wheel, a camera peripheral called Xbox Live Vision which have EyeToy-style functionality, as well as letting you customise your gamer picture, send photo messages and even video chat over Live.

Finally, the external HD DVD drive was unveiled and looks quite slick — a bit like a mini 360 actually. It will be available by Christmas.

First Look!

DUE: 2007

HALO 3 XBOX 360 • **Developer:** Bungie • **The Hype:** Master Chief goes back to the future to save Doc... or was that McFly?
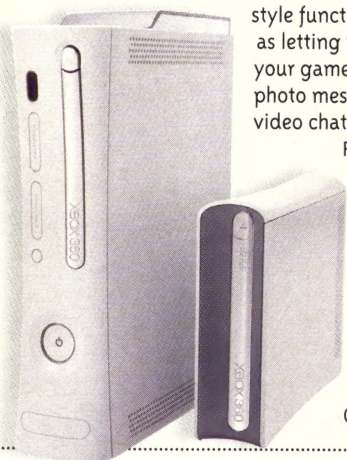
HYPER'S TOP 12
Wii Jokes

Yes it really is true. The Nintendo Revolution's official name is the Nintendo Wii. It's an awful name, definitely usurping Microsoft and their "It's good to play together" motto in the dumb ideas category. In any case, it's an amazing system with almost limitless potential so it seems a Wii bit silly to get caught up on a name. In an effort to get all the jokes out of our system right now, we present to you, our Top Twelve Jokes about Nintendo Wii:

12. It will have streaming content.

11. Resetting the console is a half-flush, turning it off is a full flush.

10. The Wii won't have game demos, it will have stool samples.

9. Nintendo are planning a golden shower of games.

8. If you're easily embarrassed you may not be able to Wii with people watching.

7. With Nintendo Wii, ur-ine the game.

6. Nintendo were under considerable pressure to hold in Wii leaks before the name was revealed.

5. Don't let friends Wii in your lounge room or you may have to rub their noses in it.

4. Thousands of busting E3 punters were reportedly confused by such a long line to Wii.

3. Motion sensitive controls mean that more than three shakes is definitely playing with it.

2. Guys will no longer have to feel less manly sitting down to Wii.

1. Wii is destined to be No. 1 in the console wars.

The Nintendo DS Lite will be on sale by the time you read this, for the sum of $199.95. While it's not the perfect redesign, once you see how bright the screen is, you'll never want to go back...

Huzzah! Ouendan is finally making its way to the West later this year, but no, it's not a port of the Japanese game. It's essentially a new title by the same crew (iNiS for those not in the know) and will be called Elite Beat Agents. We don't know anything about the music at this stage but fingers crossed they keep the same tone. Cheesy Jap pop ahoy! We do know, however, that it supports four player multiplayer with one cart.

The latest license to get the videogame treatment is set to be The Sopranos, and it's coming, oddly enough, to the original odd couple — the PS2 and Xbox 360. The game casts you as the illegitimate son of "Big Pussy" and you'll have to demonstrate your allegiance to Tony while a mob war between Philadelphia and New Jersey's most powerful families brews in the background. Show creator David Chase is apparently involved with the storyline and several of the main actors will be providing their voices for the game including James Gandolfini (aka Tony Soprano).

Namco's Unreal Engine 3 powered 360 title Frame City Killer has been canned. No real reason was given for the decision.

GTA: Liberty City Stories is coming to PS2 and you should be able to pick it up any day now. Just don't expect anything above and beyond the PSP version. PSP owners, on the other hand, have Vice City Stories to look forward to. Due in October, the game will obviously be set in Vice City, and will be "an entirely new game with a new storyline, new missions and gameplay." And then there's GTA IV which is due October next year and will be hitting PS3 and Xbox 360 simultaneously.

Good news for fans of the classic point and click adventure Sam & Max. The team at Telltale Games have announced that the first episode of the new Sam & Max game will be available for download over GameTap in time for Christmas!

First Look!

DUE: Late 2006

TONY HAWK'S PROJECT 8 PS3, Xbox 360
Developer: Neversoft • **The Hype:** Reengineered from the ground up for next-gen

First Look!

DUE: Xmas 2006

HOT PXL PSP • **Developer:** zSlide • **The Hype:** "200 deviously crafted micro-games based on a quirky and original story"

NINTENDO AND RARE!
Back together again...

Rare have confirmed that they're working on Diddy Kong Racing for DS, which would be their first official Nintendo project since their acquisition by Microsoft. It would also seem to indicate the Microsoft aren't planning on entering the handheld space any time soon. Info on the game? It's based on the N64 classic but expanded "in ways that only the DS allows" and features "eight-player single-card and multi-card WiFi play, touch-screen and microphone compatibility, some familiar faces in newly playable form, remodelled and retextured tracks, customisable vehicles, new modes, weapons and challenges, a little something called TT's Wish Races where you can create your very own tracks... and it doesn't end there." Shi-booya!

CAPTION THIS!

Come on, make us laugh. Just send your funny screen captions to us at captionthis@next.com.au with **Caption This Part 80** in the subject line.

PART 80

This is almost too easy...

E3 EYE CANDY

Some of the highlights of the show...

ALAN WAKE
SYSTEM: **PC** • DEVELOPER: **Remedy**

GEARS OF WAR
SYSTEM: **Xbox 360** • DEVELOPER: **Epic Games**

SUPER PAPER MARIO
SYSTEM: **GameCube** • DEVELOPER: **Intelligent Systems**

TOO HUMAN
SYSTEM: **Xbox 360** • DEVELOPER: **Silicon Knights**

ASSASSIN'S CREED
SYSTEM: **PS3** • DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Montreal**

www.assassinscreed.com

BIOSHOCK
SYSTEM: **PC** • DEVELOPER: **Irrational**

BATTLEFIELD 2142
SYSTEM: **PC** • DEVELOPER: **Digital Illusions**

TABULA RASA
SYSTEM: **PC** • DEVELOPER: **Destination Games**
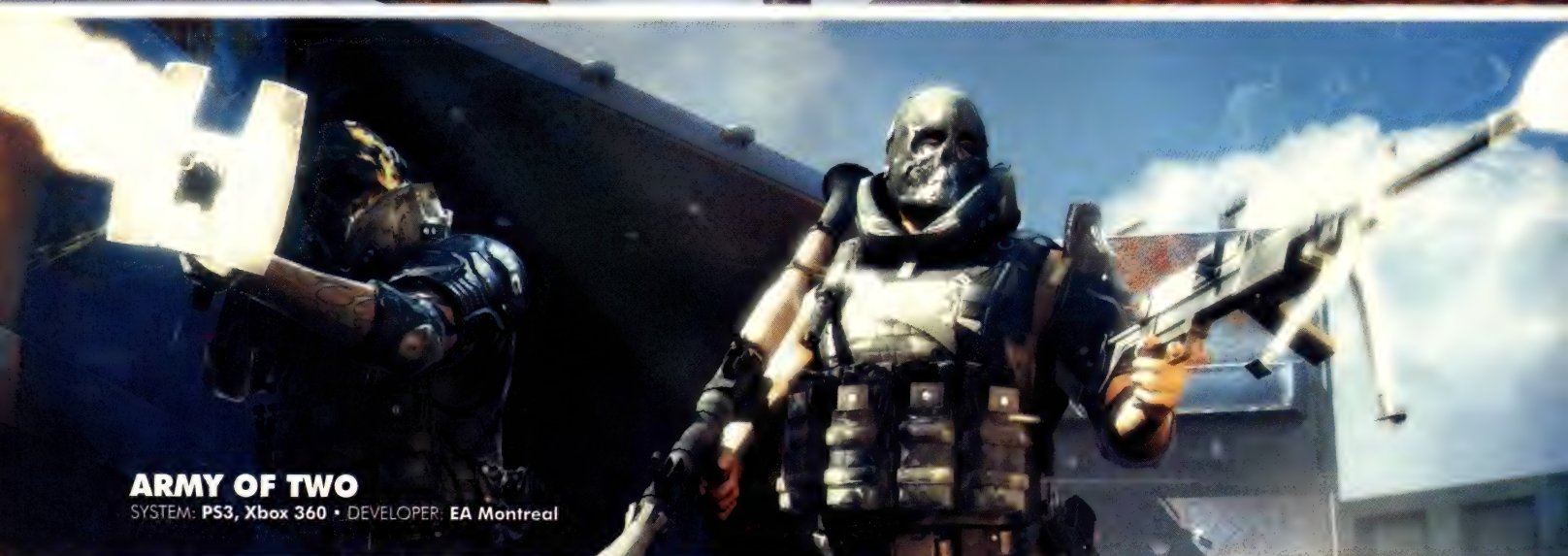
ARMY OF TWO
SYSTEM: **PS3, Xbox 360** • DEVELOPER: **EA Montreal**

BLUE DRAGON
SYSTEM: **Xbox 360** • DEVELOPER: **Mistwalker and Artoon**

YOSHI'S ISLAND 2
SYSTEM: **Nintendo DS** • DEVELOPER: **Nintendo**
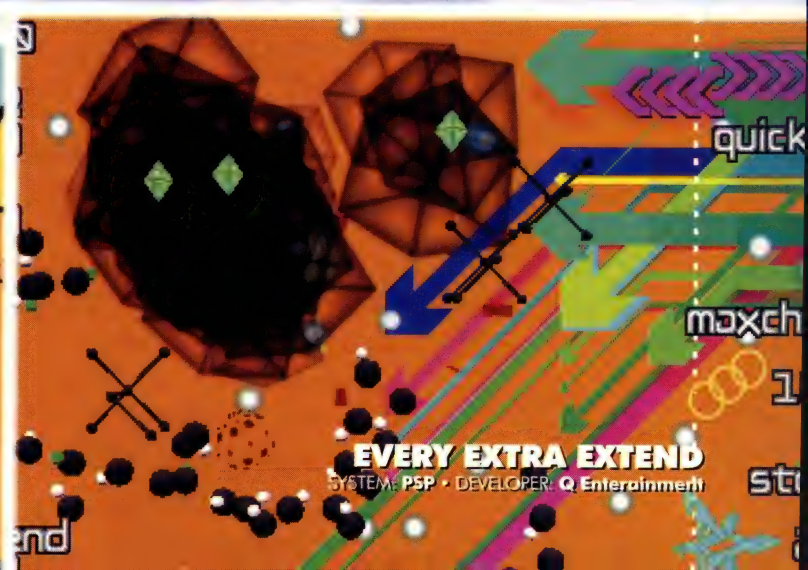
EVERY EXTRA EXTEND
SYSTEM: **PSP** • DEVELOPER: **Q Entertainment**

CRYSIS
SYSTEM: **PC** • DEVELOPER: **Crytek**

RAYMAN RAVING RABBIDS
SYSTEM: **Nintendo Wii** • DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Montpellier**

FULL AUTO 2: BATTLELINES
SYSTEM: **PS3** • DEVELOPER: **Pseudo Interactive**

VALKYRIE PROFILE 2: SILMERIA
SYSTEM: **PS2** • DEVELOPER: **Tri-Ace**

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: PHANTOM HOURGLASS
SYSTEM: **Nintendo DS** • DEVELOPER: **Nintendo**

Menu

SPLINTER CELL: DOUBLE AGENT
SYSTEM: **GCN, PC, PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360** • DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Canada (current gen), Ubisoft Shanghai (360)**

TEKKEN: DARK RESURRECTION
SYSTEM: **PSP** • DEVELOPER: **Namco**
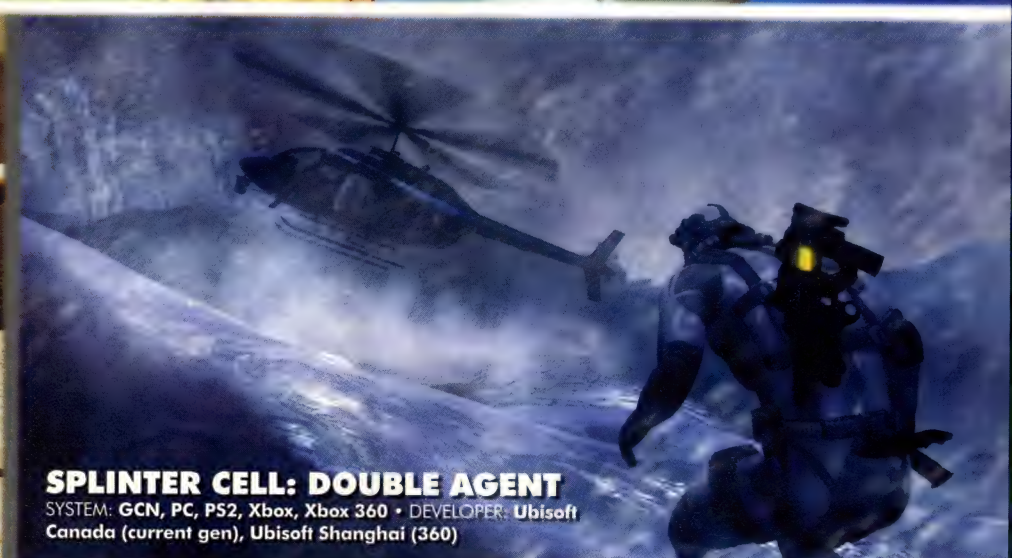
STAR FOX DS
SYSTEM: **Nintendo DS** • DEVELOPER: **Q-Games/Nintendo**

You rock!

ROB

Target
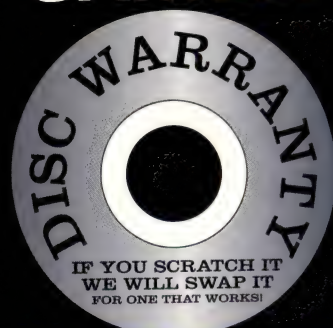
MASS EFFECT
SYSTEM: **Xbox 360** • DEVELOPER: **BioWare**

RESERVOIR DOGS
SYSTEM: **PC, PS2, Xbox** • DEVELOPER: **Volatile**

SHADOWRUN
SYSTEM: **PC, Xbox 360** • DEVELOPER: **Microsoft Game Studios**

PS3: Brute

Force

Daniel Wilks

There was a hell of a lot of bang leading up to E3. The excitement in the air was palpable standing around the back-lot of Sony studios in Culver City waiting to get into the Sony press conference. We were all eager to see the PS3. That is what we were there for — to be amazed, blown away and having it proven to us once and for all that the claims of the PS3 being the be all and end all of the next generation and an entertainment supercomputer were not just marketing by-lines. Yes, there was a hell of a lot of bang leading up to the event but unfortunately the event itself proved to be a little more on the side of whimper.

No Return for the Boomerang

In a move that really surprised no one, Sony announced that the boomerang-esque prototype controller that was revealed and universally reviled last year was no more, and in its place we had a... Dual Shock? After the initial shock (pardon the pun) wore off the differences in the controller were pointed out. Instead of the L2 and R2 shoulder buttons the new controller features analogue triggers. The most significant change, of course is the fact that it is motion sensitive; a move that is quite obviously a response to Nintendo and the Wii. Supposedly due to the wireless nature of the controller Sony have removed the rumble feature, leaving a remarkably light controller, and also leaving the name up in the air — Dual 'Shock' this ain't.

The changes seem to us to be both a good and bad idea. On the plus side the motion control could get rather tiring with a heavy controller but on the other the lightness just gave the controller the feeling of being a little ephemeral and dare we say cheap. It also comes across as a little curious considering that the Wiimote contains a rumble feature. The analogue triggers also have a smaller travel than what we are used to making them feel a little clumsy but no doubt we'll get used to it before too long.

Warhawk

After the announcement of the motion sensitive controller we were excited to get our hands on what we assumed would be the plethora of titles designed around the concept. Imagine our surprise (and disappointment) when there turned out to be only one game at the show with support. Rumour has it that the developers only had a few weeks to redesign the game for the new controller. True or not the control shows definite potential for future development but what we saw still left something to be desired. Although Warhawk will apparently feature ground based vehicles as well as the Warhawk fighter craft, the short demo build only featured the Warhawk itself to show off the level of freedom the motion sensitive PS3 controller could provide. The level of immersion in the control and freeing up your fingers to shoot instead of steer feels good but a few problems raised their collective heads during our time with the game. The first problem, control lag, probably has more to do with the early build of the game and the beta hardware but moving the controller and then having the Warhawk move a fraction later was not the best demonstration of the capabilities of the machine. The second problem was a little more telling but hopefully one that can be fixed by manually calibrating the controls. We player the game on a smaller monitor (probably around 19-21") and on a large LCD, yet the level of sensitivity didn't seem to have changed, making the game a good deal easier to control on the large screen as the same degree of movement had a smaller effect. Accuracy was greatly increased on the large screen. Presumably this problem will be fixed by release.
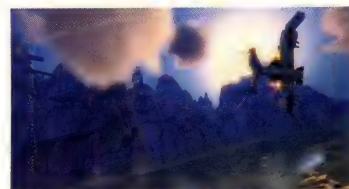
Warhawk
Funny, we can't seem to find the zillions of planes that were in the air in last year's reel...

Emulate This

One of the most interesting functions announced for the PS3 is the ability to use it to emulate PSone games on the PSP. We have no real details of how this works but we are assuming at this stage that you load the PSone game on the PS3 and it exports it to the PSP and installs that on the memory stick. This sounds very exciting to us as there are a number of classic games (the FF series definitely springs to mind) that would be great on a handheld. Strangely the game demoed at the Sony press conference as being emulated was Ridge Racer – a dubious choice considering there is already a superior PSP Ridge Racer game.

Heavenly Sword
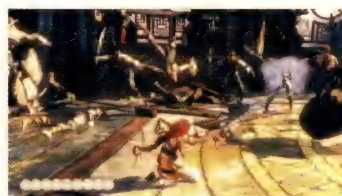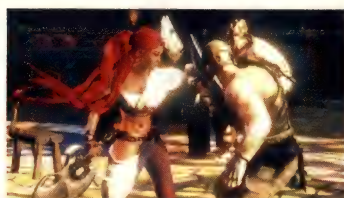
Tell 'em the price, son!

Unlike Nintendo, Sony have not been backwards about coming forwards with a release date and launch price point. Australia will be getting the console on the 17th of November this year, a week after Japan and the US. This is good news but the price point on the other hand is anything but. The 20GB version of the console will be available for $829 and the 60GB for a whopping $999. How they reached this price is beyond us – a straight currency conversion from USD to AUD nets us $649 and $779 respectively. During the Sony press conference Australia was lumped in with Europe for pricing (being a PAL territory) so the currency conversion roughly works out but one has to wonder why in Europe the bare bones PS3 costs as much as the premium console in the US and the premium package costs $200US extra. Unless bringing the machine to Europe and Australia costs around $200 USD per unit then someone is hitting our wallets pretty hard. In a related note, Ken Kutaragi came out saying that $600 for the PS3 is cheap. That may be the case, but is $767 (the current US exchange of $999 AUD)? He argues that you're not only buying a games console (or entertainment supercomputer as he likes to call it) but a Blu-Ray player as well but one has to wonder whether the appeal of Blu-Ray will overwhelm the fact that the console will launch at a price point $350 more (for the premium packs) than the comparable Xbox 360, especially considering that Microsoft have announced that the HD DVD add-on for their console will still leave the console cheaper than the PS3.

The Devil's in the Details

Without seeing any more games utilising unique control it has to be said that the next generation for Sony is one of scale and detail. By scale we do not necessarily mean bigger, but scale in reference to level of detail, animation and interaction. Although we got our hands on a number of PS3 games this is one thing they all had in common. It was hard not to be impressed by the sheer spectacle of it all. The games on display gave the definite

Genji 2 (working title)

impression that the PS3 is more about brute force than subtlety. This may sound like an insult but hear us out. By brute force we mean sheer processing power, both data and video, using this power to pump out impressive visuals, animations and physics and integrating these three things seamlessly.

Heavenly Animation

One of the best examples of this integration and sheer power is the Ninja Theory action game Heavenly Sword. As far as gameplay is concerned it really is nothing we haven't seen before. You could really think of it as "Crouching Tiger, Hidden God of War". The plot is unimportant in this example; what is important is the gorgeous way the game integrates beautiful animation, detailed environments and physics. Basically a God of War style action game (complete with enemy specific button mashing mini games), Heavenly Sword transcends the limits of the genre through the amazingly interactive fights. Huge numbers of moves can be strung in freeform combos sending enemies flying. Weapons the enemies wield can be dropped and are integrated into the physics engine meaning they can be picked up and thrown. Most objects are breakable and the pieces of broken scenery are also integrated into the physics engine. Fallen enemies become physics objects to be manipulated as well. Sure, physics interaction is nothing new but the scale on which it happens in Heavenly Sword is quite awe inspiring.

Equally awe inspiring is the level of facial animation on the in game models, during cutscenes and gameplay. This is due once again to the sheer grunt of the PS3 (and some proprietary software) that allows Ninja Theory to motion capture an entire actor, including the face. Although this really has nothing to do with the console (it's just cool), Andy Serkis is playing the villain of the piece as well as directing all of the motion capture and cutscenes.

Down and Dirty

Motorstorm and Sega Rally also show an amazing amount of detail, most impressively so in the tracks themselves. Instead of just being a textured surface as in most racing games, both Sega Rally and Motorstorm actually feature tracks that are real surfaces that can deform. Instead of simply driving on a track that has been given the traction of a dirt road or a mud track, both games feature dirt and mud tracks; tires can chew up the surface of the road leaving real three dimensional tracks that persist between laps, making the tracks incredibly malleable. Spin out on one corner and you have to remember to avoid the divots left in the road on the next pass or cause havoc with your suspension. You can get caught in grooves and be bumped about by tracks left by other drivers making control more difficult. It's a very impressive detail that deeply effects gameplay rather than simply being a cosmetic overhaul and is once again an example of the sheer grunt of the machine.

Without taking anything away from the impressiveness of the PS3 (and it is an impressive machine) there is little at the moment to really distance it from the Xbox 360 aside from the controller which is currently underutilised, but as with everything only time and a finished product will really tell. The PlayStation website says that the PS3 is "a console that screams digital carpe diem and will redefine reality as we know it". Without seeing something truly unique we wouldn't go that far. <<

Resistance: Fall of Man

Eye of Judgement

Position Lap
3   1/2

⏱ 2'08.000

Best Lap

Last Lap

1
63
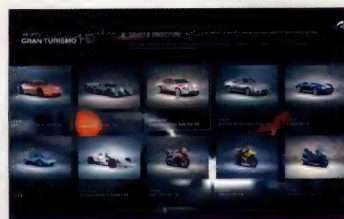
Gran Turismo HD Prototype

The Packages

Sony looks to be following Microsoft's business model by releasing two versions of the PS3, a 20GB stripped down version and a 60GB fully featured version. For the week or so after E3 confusion reigned about what the differences between the kits were, mostly due to the fact that there was no actual information in the press kit but here is what we have been able to deduce.

The 60GB version of the console will feature USB 2.0, Memory Stick/Compact Flash/SD reading, Ethernet, IEEE 802.11b/g, Bluetooth 2.0, HDMI out and will support all resolutions up to and including 1080p. The 20GB will ship without HDMI, Wi-Fi and memory card reading capabilities. It also seemed during the press conference that the 20GB model would not actually feature Bluetooth capability (negating wireless controllers) but Sony have now come out and stated categorically that both versions of the console will feature Bluetooth. Sony have also announced that, like Microsoft, they will have upgrades available so you can buy Wi-Fi and a memory card reader at a later date but HDMI will remain the sole territory of the 60GB model. This comes as something of a disappointment on a number of fronts; if the business model is indeed like that of Microsoft then the cost of upgrading the core system will be a good deal more expensive than buying the premium console in the first place and leaving off HDMI leaves us scratching our heads. Why remove the ability to play lossless HD signals when you are promoting the console as being an HD Blu-Ray player as well as an HD console?

Wii like it

Daniel Wilks

There's no two ways about it; Wii is a pretty easy name to take the piss out of. You'll have to excuse the bad pun but it's true. Even the indefatigable Shiggy made fun of the name during a behind closed doors Nintendo event. The name is not the console's strong point, no matter how much a very politely toned down Reggie belaboured the point at the Nintendo E3 pre-show press conference. It sounds rather silly and definitely doesn't do itself any favours in English speaking territories. That said, Reggie did speak a word of truth during his presentation — he said that Wii is the sound you make when playing games on the console. The sound is a bit off — evidence showed that the sound of playing the Wii is more of a joyous laughter with a touch of incredulity when you manage to do something you didn't think was going to happen.

The whole concept of the Wii control, the Remote and Nunchaku is to make gaming and control accessible to everyone. For the most part it is, but paradoxically, the longer your history of playing games the more difficult it is to come to grips with the new system. The use of a joystick, dual thumbsticks or a d-pad is heavily ingrained in the gaming mindset; not surprising considering that we have been playing that way for a quarter of a century or more. Switching from one two handed control to two one handed controls is easier said than done, taking a while to get used to the new feel. Even without motion control the control system would be something of a hurdle to overcome but you add the fact that both the Remote (or Wiimote as it is being called) and Nunchaku are motion sensitive it adds a whole new hurdle to overcome. Once you do come to grips with the controller, however, it offers up a huge range of possibilities and experiences. Without getting particularly deep into the actual mechanics of the control, the Wiimote utilises a sensor bar either attached to or placed on top of the TV/Monitor. This sensor allows for a large range of movement and control ranging from direct pointing (like a laser pointer) through to using the Wiimote as a NES style controller with added tilt functionality. The amazing thing about the controller design is the fact that it does offer up such a range of experience and control, sometimes all in the one game.

THE GAMES

Watersports

Our first hands on experience with the Wii came in the form of Wii Sports, a game that reminded us of one of those old Atari sports compilations in which the games themselves were in all honesty not all that good but when put together in one package and played with friends transcended the sum of their parts and became something special. Wii Tennis, the game played live at the Nintendo press conference was the starting point and eased us into the new control scheme as well as the possibilities of the controller. Holding the Wiimote like a tennis racquet, journalists from around the world whooped, hollered and played silly buggers trying to bash the ball back over the net. Although the animations and moves are somewhat limited, the direction and force of the swing as well as the angle of the racquet play an important role. Slice, backspin and topspin are all keyed to the angle of the Wiimote when you take a swing; a slight tilt of the wrist can drastically change the characteristics of a shot. The placement of characters on screen and chasing balls is automatic so there is really no option to play the net giving you the impression that Wii Tennis is a bit more of a tech demo then it is a game but as a tech demo it is an impressive one.

Likewise Wii Golf and Wii Baseball used the Wiimote as a defacto bat/club. Wii Golf takes the swing into account but not the angle of the swing making the game a lot more accessible than it might otherwise be. Baseball proved a bit of a problem; control of the bat is as

HYPER 25

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess
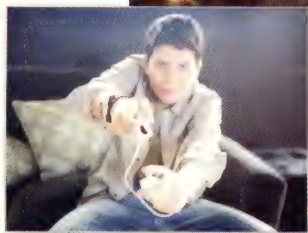
Metroid Prime 3: Corruption

intuitive and natural as you could ever want, even going so far as allowing you to practise swing the bat before the pitch just like the pros do but judging the distance to the ball is somewhat difficult from a first person view as all you have to judge distance by is the relative size of the ball on screen.

The first three sports titles we tried were all about gross movements but the fourth game/tech demo, Wii Sports: Airplane is about subtlety. Holding the Wiimote like a paper airplane, players gently manoeuvre the plane around obstacles. It's not really a game as such but a rather pleasant experience nonetheless and an excellent example of what could be possible with future flight titles. Pilot Wings anyone?

Back to gross movements, none could be grosser than the new WarioWare. WarioWare: Smooth Moves used the Wiimote in just about every manner possible, as a flyswatter, fencing foil, pump-handle, key, steering wheel, barbell and more. Before each mini game players are told how to hold the Wiimote which gives an indicator of how to play the next microgame. During our hands on time we witnessed journos doing squat thrusts with the controller perched on top of their heads, fencing with fruit, balancing a broom in their palm, steering a car on slippery roads and even playing hula hoop, the latter being achieved by holding the Wiimote at hip level and gyrating, much to the delight of everyone standing around with a drink.

Excite Truck

Handlebars

Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam, Excite Truck and Sonic Wild Fire (working title) all use the same control method but come across as very different games. The control for all of the games utilises the Wiimote like a NES style control pad with the d-pad under the left thumb and the two face buttons (other than the large A button) under the right. Held this way the Wiimote essentially becomes a set of handlebars or a steering wheel. Tilting the controller steers the onscreen character. It takes a little getting used to as the overwhelming urge is to try and turn the controller like a steering wheel rather than tilt it from side to side but once you get used to the scheme it allows for some impressively fine control.

The idea behind Excite Truck is, unsurprisingly, truck racing but the significant gimmick of the game relies entirely on the control scheme. Rocketing around a track is fun in and of itself but the game is all about boosting off jumps to get big air. This is where the Wiimote comes truly into play. Landing on four wheels gains the player a turbo boost immediately upon landing so hang time is spent making slight variations in the orientation of the controller to optimise the landing. Similar gameplay would be possible with dual analogue sticks but the level of immersion and accuracy is incredible with the Wiimote. Twisting, rotating and tilting the controller all change the orientation in the air and tilting on the ground steers the truck. With a little practise you can even pull off lengthy powerslides by jerking the controller

slightly during a turn. What could otherwise be a rather average racing game is transformed into something special by the control.

Sonic Wild Fire marks the first time since the original game that Sonic has gone on a solo adventure but that alone is not what makes the game special. Once again the revolution in control makes this 3D Sonic special. The game essentially plays as a 3D version of the old 2D games — there is no exploration and adventure, just a thrill of speed, lightning fast escapes and jumping on some bad guys. The tilt control allows for some long and graceful arcs necessary for collecting rings as well as for faster twitch controls. Although a face button is used to jump, attacks are made by rapidly moving the controller in a downwards motion after jumping; you essentially pound the enemies with the Wiimote.

Guns, Swords, Mushrooms & Balls

Sega is also in the process of developing a Monkey Ball game for the Wii (see the Tokyo feature). The Wiimote is held much like a TV remote and how it is oriented controls the orientation of the screen. Although the control is tight the method of holding the controller becomes quite painful after a short time. This could be simply because I have weak girly wrists or it may be because the level of control does not fit with the orientation of the hand.

If getting a hang of one handed control was an issue, getting used to using the Wiimote and Nunchaku was something of a nightmare. Red Steel, Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, Super Mario Galaxy, Project H.A.M.M.E.R. and Madden 2007 all utilise both controls in completely different ways. Red Steel for instance, is at heart a first person shooter so the Wiimote is used for a good portion of the time as a direct pointing cursor for the gun sight but it also doubles as a sword in

Interestingly the Wii controller features a small integrated speaker that adds an extra level of immersion. The only real demonstration of this we had was in Zelda where you could actually hear the arrow leave your bow and fly towards the screen. A number of prototype peripherals were also shown at the Nintendo stand including a very swanky looking add-on that turns the Wiimote into a light gun and a SNES style gamepad. Nintendo also announced that there will be more announcements about the controls in the coming weeks and months; we (or is that Wii) would not be at all surprised (or disappointed) if they announced that the Wiimote contained an integrated microphone to go along with the speaker to hook the massive Asian Karaoke crowd.

BANG!

Super Mario Galaxy

Wario Ware Smooth Move

Note:
Bizarrely, Nintendo only released a single screenshot for the majority of the games, and as you can see, most of these have been covered with bloody annoying "lifestyle" shots. So don't blame us, blame Ninty.

hand to hand combat. The Nunchaku is used to control movement via the thumbstick, to open doors by shaking the entire controller and to block during sword fights by moving it in the direction of the attack.

Two demos of Twilight Princess were available on the show floor, each showing off different uses of the Wiimote and Nunchaku. The first, a simple dungeon introduced players to the concept of using the Wiimote as both a direct pointer for menu commands, the bow, grapple and boomerang as well as to control sword attacks (either by swinging the controller or hitting the A button). The Nunchaku controlled movement and also triggered the spin attack when swung in a circular motion. Unfortunately this demo, aside from being rather frustrating due to direct pointing sensitivity, didn't really show anything that was new in a Zelda game; no new abilities or powers based around the new method of control. The fact that both a GCN and Wii version of the game will be released on the same day (Wii launch) reinforced this idea.

Thankfully the second demo, a simple mini-game of Link fishing, showed off another use of the controller that would not be possible on the GCN. The Wiimote is held like a fishing rod; players cast like they would, lead the lure like they would by jerking the rod slightly and hook the fish as they would normally by pulling back sharply on the rod. When the fish is hooked it can be reeled in by pressing the A button. Amazingly, the developers have implemented what is essentially a control easter egg - miming winding in the reel with the Nunchaku actually does reel in the line. It's hard to describe the wonderful feeling of simply mucking around with a friend and discovering that the developers have thought those two steps ahead and reward your playfulness. Project H.A.M.M.E.R. uses a similar control scheme with the nunchaku controlling movement and the

Wiimote being swung to make hammer attacks.

Super Mario Galaxy also utilises a similar control scheme to Zelda in that the Nunchaku controls movement and the Wiimote is used as a direct pointing device for direct manipulation of the environment; you can shake grass to expose coins or ring bells to trigger events. Although the control scheme may be different to older Mario games, the real defining point of Super Mario Galaxy is the shift from 3D to **3D**, as many of the levels take place on spherical planetoids, allowing our favourite plumber to run over the entire surface. Although this would have been possible on the GCN it's nice to see the game being extended for Wii.

Madden may be an old series but the Wii incarnation makes the experience a whole lot more visceral than before due to the - you guessed it - control scheme. The Wiimote is used to hike the ball by bringing your wrist back sharply and you throw by performing a throwing motion. The Nunchaku and Wiimote are also used for stiff arming, tackling and sidestepping. It's more immersive than standard control Madden, almost turning the game itself into a sport rather than turning the sport into the game.

Interactive exercise

All of the games showed one thing in common with the control scheme — it can get rather tiring. Rather than sitting comfortably and unmoving (aside from thumbs) for a few hours, the Wii control makes gameplay far more active with both hands in motion and sometimes even requiring even more energetic movement as in the case of Warioware. Is this a bad thing? Not at all. In essence it opens up a whole new area of potential with interactive exercise games that don't require an extra peripheral to use. The games that use the Wiimote as a direct pointer also showed a tendency

Super Smash Bros. Brawl
Now featuring Solid Snake!
Best. Game. Ever.

Fire Emblem
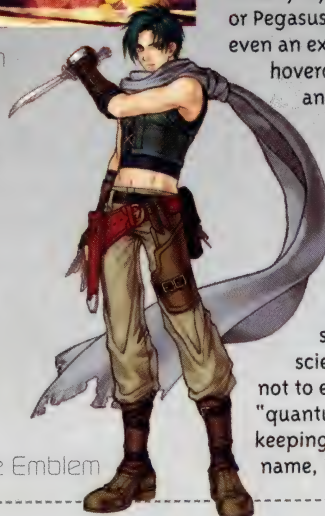
towards being oversensitive making some actions far more difficult than necessary but we were assured by Nintendo representatives that players would be able to adjust the sensitivity to suit their own tastes.

So, how do the games look? Pretty damn good overall. Though not as impressive as the Xbox 360 and PS3 due to the lack of any true HD display, the Wii (only capable of 480p) is still no slouch. For comparison purposes games running on Wii look a little better than current Xbox development and a leap ahead of what we currently see on the GCN. The size and detail of the landscapes on display, especially in Excite Truck and Red Steel are very impressive running at 60fps. Considering this is only the first wave of games not running on final hardware and by and large unoptimised and the future of Nintendo looks good.

The coming of the Wii gives us the definite impression that the next generation is going back to being a three horse race instead of the Microsoft/Sony battle of the current gen with Nintendo creeping along some ways in the back. Of course, sticking with the race analogy, whilst Microsoft and Sony are riding horses bred for speed and probably on enough steroids to make their hearts explode after a few furlongs, Nintendo appears to be riding some kind of mythical beast like a unicorn or Pegasus, or perhaps maybe even an experimental horse shaped hovercraft powered by love and puppies. Whatever the case the fact remains that the Wii is, for want of a stronger term, amazing. Even though members of the team wear glasses we are still not bespectacled enough to call the Wii a "paradigm shift" and we are scientifically minded enough not to erroneously use the term "quantum leap" but the Wii, in keeping with its development name, is a revolution. <<

ドカン

(Hyper's Super Happy SEGA Japan Trip Fantastic!!)

Cam Shea!!

ong time readers will know all about the glaring discrepancy that exists in the metering out of junkets between the staff of this very magazine. It can be summed up quite concisely by the rule I like to call "Editor's Law", which simply states that "Any and all trips whereby a journalist spends more time in the air than on the ground shall be undertaken by the deputy editor. Any trips with considerable free time or a particularly enjoyable destination, such as Japan, Hong Kong or the South of France will be the sole property of the editor." It's a rule that's not without its advantages, and one from which I receive perhaps a little too much joy enforcing.

Of course, one day Wilks will cast the shackles of press trip oppression aside and end up hanging with Shiggy at Nintendo of Japan while I sob quietly on the streets of Redfern. Fortunately, however, that time has not yet come to pass, and I was lucky enough to be invited to Sega's Japanese headquarters to see where the magic happens. As you can imagine, this is the trip of a lifetime for a Sega fanboy, so it's a bit of a shame that I'm more a Sega admirer than fanboy.

Don't get me wrong. I have a soft spot for many a Sega title — Daytona, Sega Rally, Jet Set Radio, Space Channel 5, Crazy Taxi and the Virtua Fighter series to name a few. Unfortunately however, Sega is a company that seems to have lost its way somewhat. With its move out of hardware and the diminishing arcade scene, Sega is struggling for relevance in the modern gaming landscape. While acquiring Western developers and publishing more Western developed titles is a huge part of the gameplan for Sega, in order to claw back their cutting edge reputation of old there's no doubt that Sega Japan will have a huge role to play. Just what that role may be - and whether it's working, is what I went to Japan to find out.

Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz

W hile we much preferred the codename for this title, which was Hyper Monkey Ball, there's no doubt that the idea of playing Monkey Ball using the Nintendo Wii's innovative control method could be just about the best thing ever. Not only is this a game that's perfectly suited to waving a controller around, but the team have also packed in a huge array of mini-games, all designed to get the most out of the controller. It really seems like they've had a ball (excuse the pun) making this one, and Toshihiro Nagoshi, the head of Sega's R&D1 studio (formerly AM4/Amusement Vision), was on hand to tell us all about it.

It's natural enough to imagine tilting the controller to move your monkey around, but there's a new jump move for Banana Blitz too. Just give the controller a bit of a flick up and there you have it. This has huge implications for level design as you'll be able to jump gaps and climb platforms. Another change is that the size and weight of the ball will differ between characters, bringing unique strengths and weaknesses into the game. Another new inclusion are boss battles. No doubt the new jumping function will come into play with these, and as you can see from the screenshots, some of the bosses are pretty massive.

The mini-games have been huge fan favourites in previous instalments, and Nagoshi revealed that the whole mini-game system has been given a major overhaul for Banana Blitz. They're now smaller in scope than before, but there are a whole lot more of them - we're talking 100! Some previous faves will carry over (Monkey Target would work a treat) but we're itching to see what the new games have in store. We do know that there's a baseball mini-game, as well as Simon Says, an alien shooter, horseshoes, jump rope, whack-a-mole, fishing, archery, hurdles and a game where you must bounce falling fruit into the appropriately marked basket. It's probably more fun than it sounds.

Nagoshi was quite frank in telling us that the visuals aren't a big step up from current gen, but felt that this was less important than making a game that's easy to get into and that will appeal to the mass market. Above all else he wants this new Monkey Ball game to feel completely fresh thanks to the controller, and from everything we've seen, he's on the right track.

Details Get!
SYSTEM: **Nintendo Wii**
CATEGORY: **Monkey torture**
PLAYERS: **1-4**
DEVELOPER: **R&D1/ Amusement Vision**
DUE: **Late 2006**

Bananas + balls + Wii = unlimited comedy potential

Who is driving? Lobster is driving!

There are a whole bunch of reasons to love Tokyo like the fantastic food, vibrant nightlife, awesome shopping and efficient public transport, but it's the crazy shit that really gives it personality. Would you believe for instance, that the first Japanese TV I saw after I arrived was a showdown between a lobster and a rhino beetle? No, not anime, a real life lobster and a real life rhino beetle, perched atop a large sawn off log, doing battle. The best part, however, was that the rhino beetle looked as though he was licked and turned and fled to the outside of the ring… only to flank around the outside to attack the lobster from behind, who then fell off the log. Yes, the rhino beetle won, and the entire encounter was accompanied by screaming Japanese commentary. Best. TV. Ever.

Of course, this was just the tip of the iceberg and over the next few days we discovered that beetle fighting is actually a massive fad in Japan, and has been for a while. I saw a another show where a young Japanese girl travelled to Indonesia to go out into the jungle to capture beetles to bring back to Japan to fight. I saw remote controlled beetle fighting kits in stores. Even Sega was wrapped up in the madness. They've made a bunch of "Mushi King" beetle fighting games, for arcade, DS and more. Do a search for Mushi King and you'll see what I'm talking about. Hell, the Sega offices even had blow up beetles littering the floor! WTHIWWJP?

Fun Facts About Japan!

The popular drink Pocari Sweat (found in approx ten million vending machines across Tokyo) doesn't really contain sweat! It's actually made using the tears of virgins. And you don't want to know what Calpis is made from…

Virtua Tennis 3

Y ou know the old saying, "if you don't fix it, then it probably ain't broke"? Well welcome to Virtua Tennis 3. Sega have given the series a very tasty visual makeover, but in gameplay terms the same rock solid brand of arcade tennis remains.

We're certainly not complaining however, and after playing the arcade version at the Super Happy SEGA Fun Factory (they have two buildings in close proximity, with AM2 and AM3 located in the Fun Factory, while Sonic Team are in the SEGA Globo-Chem Joy Police II building, where the II is represented by two fingers in the V for Victory kawaii position) Virtua Tennis 3 is on track to become yet another standout tennis title.

Sega weren't too forthcoming with information about the console versions, but here's what we know about the arcade version. It runs on the Lindbergh graphics board, has 12 famous players including Lleyton "I have a permanent place on the cover of New Idea" Hewitt, Roger "kind of difficult to make fun of because he seems like a really nice guy and isn't annoying like Lleyton" Federer and Andy "this is too easy because he's a loud mouth American" Roddick.

There's a new mode joining Tournament this time around called Challenge, where you basically have to beat a series of mini-challenges within a time limit. These start out easy, such as 'Hit Four Forehands in a Row' and 'Win With a Drop Shot' and rapidly get harder. There are about 50 challenges in all.

Also new to Virtua Tennis 3 is IC Card support which lets you pick up your game where you left off, complete with win/loss ratio, medals won in Challenge mode and your customised player. Of course, whether the IC Card system makes it over here remains to be seen.

It's the visuals that are most deserving of attention however, and the Lindbergh board has really enabled Sega to compete with other next-generation games. Players are hugely detailed now, from stubble and moles on their faces right down to sweat making their shirts ripple and stick to their skin. Courtside and crowd detail is also impressive, with some of the most famous center courts from around the world represented with packed houses. Tying into gameplay, Virtua Tennis 3 has twice the number of player animations than Virtua Tennis 2, which translates into smoother movement and an even more intuitive feel.

While details were scarce, as far as the home version goes, it will (obviously) have a Career mode, but this time with a vastly improved player creation utility, as well as the return of the "popular and addictive" stat building mini-games from previous editions, plus a number of new ones. Let's hope that they're less annoying this time. We're also hoping that Sega will take a leaf out of Top Spin 2's book and give us stat rewards for winning tournaments, and not just for doing training.

Time to...

To pass the time on the flight over, the other Aussie journalist on the trip — let's call him Wristham Oglesworthy — and I constructed an elaborate series of "time to..." challenges for our time in Japan. Here are the results:

- **Time To Japanese Schoolgirl:** -11 hours (there was a whole gaggle of them on our flight over)
- **Time To Hot Japanese Schoolgirl:** Still pending
- **Distance To Coffee in a Can:** Approx 250 meters after stepping off the plane
- **Time To Massive Ferris Wheel in the Middle of Nowhere:** 20 minutes from Narita Airport
- **Time To Second Massive Ferris Wheel in the Middle of Nowhere:** 40 minutes from Narita Airport
- **Time To Sakura: Cherry Blossoms?** 0 minutes (from the plane window). **The Street Fighter Character?** 5 hours (in Akihabara on the first afternoon)
- **Time To Hilarious Pronunciation:** 9 hours (the SEGA theme park we visited on the first evening was called "Joypolis" but everyone seemed to pronounce it Joy-Police)
- **Time To A Lobster Fighting a Rhino Beetle:** 5 hours
- **Time To A Dog Riding A Monkey:** Still pending (lying Germans)
- **Time To Karaoke:** 3 days (or perhaps more accurately, about 7 Kirins and a couple of Suntory times)

He likes the nightlife, he likes to boogie...
BOOGIE DAMN YOU!

This is actually Cam's living room in Sydney... sick freak

Stop, in the name of the Joy Police

The Japanese aren't exactly worried about safety, they're manically paranoid about it. Or at least, that's the impression we got after visiting the Sega amusement park Joypolis. Every single ride, whether it was the hydraulic mounted version of House of the Dead 4 (which spun you around between front and rear screens) or Sonic Canball (where you throw balls at occasionally opening trashcans) was festooned with warning signs every step of the way. There'd be a warning sign at the start of the queue. A massive warning board at the end of the queue. And let's not forget that for every single ride the workers would thrust another copy of the warnings in your face until you nodded emphatically that yes you

understood the warnings. Seriously man, it was like an Orwellian vision of a theme park in the future... except with lots of rides from like, ten years ago. Guarded by the fascist Joy Police. Here are some examples of the things you cannot do if you wish to ride/play (and please note all misspellings are faithfully maintained):

• You shouldn't be in some kind of medication
• If you have a sight problem/hearing problem/high blood pressure/heart, back or neck problems/artificial leg/internal disease/fracture or bone problem/finger and arm problems/wheelchair
• If you are a person with noise hypersensitive/dark hypersensitive/acrophobia/movement hypersensitive/autism/mentally ill
• You souldn't be drunk
• If you have experienced a temporary cramp or defect of memory in the past by watching TV, playing a TV game or watching a light reflection

At times it felt like more space was devoted to warnings than to actual games. And here's the capper. You can't play: "If you are coming from some other foreign countries and cannot understand the requirements that is shown in the brochure. (If you are accompanied by someone who can understand the brochure, you are all right to use this facility)". So essentially – foreigners be gone! It's like Disneyland, only a little less strict.

Fun Facts About Japan!

The Japanese are obsessed with baseball. Seriously obsessed. At any given time, turning on the TV will net you about three channels with live baseball, with excellent odds that one of the other channels will be showing Major League II or Mr Baseball. Why bother with baseball when we could be watching a lobster face off against a monkey?

Let's Make a Soccer Team

The Saka-Tsuku soccer management games have been a long running and very successful series for SEGA in Japan. Kicking off on Saturn ten years ago, this is the first time the series is heading for Western release, under the rather Japanese name "Let's Make A Soccer Team". It's probably not such a bad title though, as this is a very different style of management game to something like Football Manager. Forget page after page of stats and an incredibly deep but also intimidating number of options. Let's Make is much more accessible and much more 'attractive' in presentation. No one could be fooled into thinking they were looking at a spreadsheet with this game.

That's not to say it's shallow. The ten years of refinements are obvious — this is a smart and often sophisticated management game.

The Japanese love a good 'rising from the ashes through hard work and harder decisions' story, so the game starts you off as a third division team with the chance to be promoted, with

the ultimate goal being to become the top team in the top division. With the hottest secretaries (more on that in a sec). Indeed, the motto from one of the ad campaigns for the series summed it up best. Apparently, managing you own club is "man's spirit of romantic adventure". Two thumbs up for that one.

The game focuses on European clubs and competitions, such as the Champion's League and Premier League. The game has a number of licensed clubs and over 9,000 real players. Choosing a team is easy and allows you to zoom in on a map of six European countries (England, Holland, France, Spain, Germany and Italy), then down to a regional level before settling on one of 600 cities.

In fact, everything you do in-game is accessible and straightforward. From the basics like buying and selling players and coaching staff, changing team strategies and deciding on training regimes, through to expanding

Details Get!

SYSTEM: **PS2**
CATEGORY: **Soccer Management**
PLAYERS: **1-2**
DEVELOPER: **Sega**
DUE: **2006**

the team's facilities (the stadium, training field, kiosks and offices), merchandising options, the realistic trade market and agent transfer system, and even a rival system, it's a good range of options.

And hell, there are even a wide variety of hot secretaries who can work at your club. They even come with their own stats... although how useful it is to know that your secretary's specialty is "Portable Shrine" and that she hates "Hairy Caterpillar" and loves "Cactus" is somewhat debatable. (And no, we didn't make those up).

The emphasis is definitely on fun and living the dream (or romantic adventure as the case may be). Famous players, for instance, who are now 35 are set to age 18 in the game - that way you don't have to retire them too soon. Games are viewed in a sophisticated real-time match engine in either real-time or 2X/3X. It's not super smooth but it's pretty damn good all things considered.

Plus, now that Sega own Sports Interactive (the makers of Football Manager), it's very likely they'll actually able to share SI's amazing stat database for future releases.

FW 7 Raul Gonzalez
Today's 1st Goal

2006-2007 Jul 1st.week Mid.Week £ 3,777,846

2006-2007 Jul 1st.week Week End £ 2,307,866

Yakuza

Oh Snap.!!

Fun Facts About Japan!

Ever wondered just why there's so much poorly translated Engrish hilarity coming out of Japan? It may have something to do with the education system. Several times while getting trains around Tokyo we were subjected to "One Minute English School" on the many in-carriage LCDs. During this, we were taught by Piotr (now there's a good English name) a bespectacled man who looked disturbingly like an Austrian psychoanalyst, and who enunciated the difference between the words "shoe cream" and "creampuff". Bet that'll come in handy.

Yakuza has to be up there as one of the most anticipated SEGA releases for PS2 this year. Although it's already out in Japan (under the name Ryu Ga Gotoku), the huge emphasis placed on story and dialogue has made this one a very tough nut to crack for importers that aren't fluent in the language, so finally getting a taste of the English language version was very cool indeed.

What to expect? Think an action adventure game along the lines of Shenmue, set in the hustle and bustle of the red light areas of Tokyo, as you go up against the Yakuza crime syndicate.

You play as Kiryu Kazuma, a member of the Dojo-clan Yakuza who was rising through the ranks until he took the fall for the death of a senior member of the clan to protect a mobster buddy and female friend. Ten years in gaol later, he's not exactly popular with the clan, and the death of his old boss and friend, plus a truckload of missing yen and a mysterious girl draws him into an epic underworld plot. Naturally you'll need to interrogate, bribe and beat your way to the truth, on a journey that will expose the mysteries of the Yakuza and Tokyo's underground nightlife.

YOU WANT TO FIGHT?

Yakuza looks to have something for just about everyone. Although narrative driven, it boasts a huge number of side-missions and mini-games, as well as fleshed out street brawling action sequences. In these, Kazuma can find himself facing off against a number of opponents at once. While the mechanics are quite straightforward, they're gratifying nonetheless. In addition to basic kick and punch combos, Kazuma can also use the environment around him, picking

up and swinging or throwing bikes, golf clubs and garbage cans, as well as grabbing enemies and hurling them into tables or vending machines. It can get pretty hectic and enemies won't waste any time trying to surround you. Then there's the Heat Gauge, which is filled by performing a quick series of attacks without getting hit, and allows you to grab an enemy and slam him into a nearby wall or piece of furniture in a brutal finishing move.

You gain experience points through almost everything you do, whether it be combat or eating food. These points can be allocated into different attributes such as strength, stamina and health, and also unlock new fighting combos.

It would be unfair to focus too heavily on the fighting however, as this is only one component of Yakuza. You'll be spending a fair portion of your time with the game in more traditional adventure gameplay, infiltrating locations, finding information and solving simple puzzles. Talking to certain people will also unlock a whole host of side missions.

There are also a number of mini-games, and we were taken through three of them, all of which are very Japanese. The first was a trip to a hostess bar. You choose a girl to be your companion for the evening and buy her drinks and presents. She asks you a whole range of questions, and if you answer correctly you'll get 'heart markers' on screen. These in turn unlock new side-missions. The other two we saw were a baseball batting cage and hitting the casino (named, amusingly enough, the 'Volcanic

Volcano') for a spot of Blackjack. The game's producer Toshihiro Nagoshi promised us that these are just a few, with pachinko parlours and strip clubs also awaiting.

MOB DEEP

Although not explicitly set in the mob-heavy areas of Shinjuku (Kabukicho in particular), there can be little doubt as to the source of inspiration for the game's Kamurocho town. We went for a nighttime stroll around Kabukicho (see the photo above) and the similarity to certain areas in the game was eerie. Sure, there's the obvious stuff like the neon signs cluttering the streets and the ever present crowds of people, but there are also cul-de-sacs and buildings pulled straight from real life into the game. Not only are the streets authentic but many of the shops and brands have been licensed and included in the game too. Want to go to Don Quixote? You can - although no game can capture the heart-attack-waiting-to-happen madness of this six story supercharged-reject-shop-gone-rogue. It's a great representation of Tokyo's vibrant nightlife, and there are plenty of indoor locations too, from convenience stores to nightclubs. As you play you'll open up more areas to visit until you've got a huge slice of Tokyo at your disposal.

The build we saw still only had English subtitles, with voice recording yet to be completed. Unfortunately, for a game so immersed in Japanese culture, there won't be an option to play with Japanese voice acting and English subtitles. According to Nagoshi, there simply isn't enough room on the disc to fit two sets of audio dialogue. Given the fact that the game boasts 200 minutes of in-game cinematics, he has a point.

Yakuza will be winging its way to the West later this year, and the opportunity to spend between 20 and 40 hours immersed in Japanese gangster subculture will be one few gamers should pass on.

Yeah but Van Damme can do that move between two chairs

Virtua Fighter 5

Sega have been solidly playtesting Virtua Fighter 5 since its first arcade test late last year, and when we came to town it was again available to play in select arcades around Tokyo, with a nationwide test to follow. It's a testament to how important fan input is to the franchise, and a truly organic way to get valuable data from the people who know the previous games back to front.

We were briefly taken through the game by members of the team, then let loose on one of the arcade setups at AM2 (but woe betide anyone who wanted to explore the floor — these guys were serious about keeping prying eyes away from the many development stations).

What's changed? Well first up the game is designed for high definition 16:9 displays and runs on Sega's powerful new Lindbergh arcade board which sports nifty effects such as HDRI (High Dynamic Range Images) to give a greater sense of lighting intensity — whether it be shadow or direct light.

The Lindbergh board has allowed the team to create really detailed character models and backgrounds. While the characters have that unsettlingly shiny look to them, other aspects of the models are hugely sophisticated — the texture and movement of clothing, the

Details Get!

Details Get!
SYSTEM: **Arcade/PS3**
CATEGORY: **Fighting**
PLAYERS: **1-2**
DEVELOPER: **AM2**
DUE: **July (Japanese arcades), 2007 (PS3)**

rippling muscles, the ultra fine hair and the finer facial details, whether they be wrinkles or scars. We also noticed that the team have emphasised size differences between characters more. Someone like Jeffry really towers over other fighters now, and he seems a little slower to boot.

The environments are truly impressive, and a number return from previous games — Virtua Fighter 2's awesome raft stage for instance is back, as is the tropical beach setting which is so synonymous with SEGA's style of high impact graphics. It's the lighting that is perhaps the most impressive element of the visuals, and really helps bring the arenas to life. Lau's stage for one looks amazing. Set on the Great Wall as the sun sets and construction workers look on, the mood is fantastic. El Blaze's stage is also hugely impressive. Set in the city it features cheering spectators, cars going by in the background, and puddles of water that reflect the fighters.

Sega have upped the graphics skilfully, but this is also a game that's going to really do some great things for the arcade scene in Japan. Where Virtua Fighter 4 brought with it VF.net which allowed players to use an IC Card to keep a record of their game — win/loss ratios, items collected or bought, and so on, Virtua Fighter 5 is taking this concept and really running with it.

IC Cards and character customisations are both back but taken to a new level. Arcades will have a separate kiosk (the VF Terminal) where you can insert your IC Card and purchase stuff, look at what you've unlocked and equip different accessories right there in the arcade

(as opposed to the system with VF4 where you did it via mobile or PC). It's a simple touch screen interface, and in addition to customising everything from hair style to the accoutrements fighters wear, like sunglasses or pirate hats (fingers crossed) you can also customise your ring entry animations and ring name. There are four basic costumes per character, plus twice as many items as the last game, and several more body parts that you can customise.

The other part of the VF5 arcade setup is VF.TV. This is another screen that's connected to the network across Japan and broadcasts content like bouts and developer/player interviews. Replays of bouts show information about each of the players (such as their win/loss ratio, longest winning streak etc), information about where and when the bout took place, what replays are coming up, and even information about overall player rankings. Cooler still, replays even come with two person commentary that's generated from a database of pre-recorded voice acting. And of course, what TV channel would

be complete without ad breaks? Perhaps the most useful aspect of the new system is that you can save your match and get the replay sent to your home PC via VF.net. While none of this stuff is likely to make it over here, we imagine that the PS3 version will also feature a lot of this functionality — think Gotham TV for fighting freaks.

In terms of gameplay, one of the team's biggest goals for VF5 was to break away from a two dimensional fighting system, and one of the ways they've done this is to allow characters to diagonally dodge with a simple double tap up or down (as opposed to the single tap side step), allowing you to reposition yourself to the side or behind for attack. This move is both evasive and tactical with new moves as part of the manoeuvre. Characters also have a whole range of new animations when they get hit on the side, and you can get some deadly stuns in too if you use it well. Throw in new moves and combos, plus some slightly altered commands for each of the 15 returning characters, and you've got the best VF game yet.

Fun Facts About Japan!

Internet cafes in Japan are mental. Private partitioned booths, free drinks, whole libraries of DVDs, magazines, manga you can use, high-backed comfy chairs, the works. At first it seems great, then you see someone across the floor reach up for a tissue and suddenly you can't get out of there fast enough. Eeewww.

Come on Eileen

There are two new characters in VF5. The first is El Blaze, a Mexican wrestler who fights in the Lucha Libre style. He's a long time rival of Wolf, but fights very differently. He's faster and more technical - more a showman than Wolf who is a little slower and harder hitting. Indeed, according to Sega's backstory, El Blaze is unrivalled in the light-heavyweight division but is envious of Wolf's success in the heavyweight division, so enters the Tournament to take on and beat Wolf.

The other new character is a Chinese girl named Eileen who fights using Kou-Ken style (monkey stance kung fu) which is obviously fast and varied, leaving your opponent constantly guessing as you flip around the arena and use speed to interrupt combos and outmanoeuvre. Her backstory is that she lost her parents at an early age and was raised by her martial arts master grandfather. She also spent time studying with a Beijing opera troupe. It's not validation that brings her to the VF5 Tournament, however, but an obsession with Pai-Chan.

Phantasy Star Universe

In Phantasy Star Universe, you'll take on the role of Ethan Waber, a 17 year old human who has just joined the interstellar peace keeping force the GUARDIANS, only to see war break out with the mysterious SEED and his sister kidnapped. The scene is set for an epic tale as Ethan quests to find his sister and discover the truth behind the alien menace.

At least, that's what you'll be doing in the single player game. In a very cool touch, Phantasy Star Universe's network mode follows the same tumultuous events as the single player game, but allows you to play through them a few steps removed from the focal characters. So you'll use the exact same game system and still be tied into the strong single player narrative. It's a nice idea, and one that, despite numerous delays, seems to be coming together.

The game's Director Satoshi Sakai took the time to take us through the game and answer questions, then let us loose with the code. First up we checked out the three planets in the Gurhal system. The home planet of the Newman race is quite oriental in design style, with temple-like structures and wooden bridges across narrow waterways. The Beast planet, on the other hand, is filled with huge canyons and is rocky and desolate, with an industrial design for the structures. It's much more of a frontier planet, especially when compared to the ultra hi-tech neon blue skyscrapers of the Human home planet. The environments are very distinctive, each suiting its race well. Of course, there's a fourth race in the game, the Robots, who don't have a home planet, but hey, they're robots so what do they care? To get around each location there are a number of vehicles you can pilot, from air bikes and battle tanks to animals you can ride.

Those of you who played Phantasy Star Online will be right at home with the style of design in the game, although it's obviously a big step up in terms of detail — particularly on PC and 360. The action is still real-time and there are some absolutely huge enemies. Two we encountered were a giant fire breathing dragon and a truly enormous horned demon. Good thing then that there's a massive range of weapons in the game, broken up into 20 categories. You're able to equip different weapons to each hand, so you may wield two energy swords, or one staff and one plasma gun. You can also customise your weapons, which entails strengthening them at shops in-game using the 'Grinder'. Of course, it can fail and you can lose the weapon altogether.

One aspect we spent a bit of time with is character creation. The team have worked hard to improve upon the well received character creation functionality in PSO, and elements like morphing face shape and body size work really well. There are a stack of different clothes to choose from, allowing you to put together some delightfully garish sci-fi creations or, if your character is a robot, swap in a range of cool helmets, face plates and mech style armour. You can buy more clothes from the shops in-game, and even create your own clothes in the online game. The customisation doesn't end there. When creating your character you can not only choose your voice, but radically alter its pitch, so there's much more variation than you'd expect.

There's a partner system in the game for players at the highest levels too. Sakai demonstrated this by creating a diminutive fairy-like girl with a sword almost as twice as long as she was high, then took her into battle alongside his primary character.

Another nice touch is the fact that if you don't have the full complement of six players for your online party, you can bring NPCs in to fill in the gaps. Also cool is that you'll be able to use the same account across multiple platforms, and also play with people on different versions of the game.

When Karaoke Goes Horribly Right

I'll be the first to admit that I wasn't exactly ecstatic when we were told that karaoke was on the agenda for our evening in Shinjuku. Still, it's amazing what Kirin and Suntory can do for one's enthusiasm levels. By the time we started looking it was past midnight, so we had to rely on a hawker to find us a karaoke bar. Nothing about the place screamed 'class'. The reception area was nothing short of shifty and filled with sketchy looking people. The place itself was called "On-Pooh" and the bathrooms were in a shocking state. The tacky day-glo explosion in the elevator when the lights went down, accompanied by rocket ship sound effects and thumping music also helped instil a sense of dread.

Like everything in Tokyo, however, the scale is simply different to what we're used to. If your shoe store is less than six stories high then you're just not trying hard enough. Each On Pooh floor wasn't huge, housing maybe five or six private rooms, but in a large building that's an awful lot of discordant singing, which certainly helped make us feel like part of some crazy drunken cult. And once your inhibitions are shattered, there's nothing like a rousing rendition of Bohemian Rhapsody to help people bond.

!!! There are three hours of anime quality cutscenes in single player, and the game is broken up into chapters, each at least an hour long.

Cam and some guy who's obviously dreaming of waffles

Sonic the Hedgehog

S onic the Hedgehog for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 was unquestionably the biggest title we'd come to Sega HQ to see. It's also the title for which Sega have the most at stake. Once upon a time Sonic catapulted Sega from a distant second in the console race to being the embodiment of cool for a generation of gamers. Brash and full of attitude, Sonic has been Sega's mascot since then, but does he have what it takes to help Sega regain their cool cache? While Sonic Adventure screamed next gen (at least in terms of graphics) and there have been some fantastic handheld outings in the last few years, the reality is that the Sonic franchise has been on a slippery slope into obsolescence for some time now. Sega have tried to reinvent him countless times; through placing greater emphasis on his friends (Sonic Heroes), trying to shake up the gameplay (Shadow the Hedgehog) and by going all extreme sports on us (Sonic Riders), amongst others. In terms of critical reception none of these approaches have worked, and so for the latest title — Sonic's 15th birthday and debut on next gen machines — Sega's mantra is to look back at what has made Sonic great, in order to go forward.

Sonic Team's meeting room was nothing if not playful. A long low table surrounded by cushions for visitors to sit on dominated the room, with large Sonic plush toys along the walls. The message was play, but outside, the dense city of partitions housed a huge team of worker bees, all frantically getting on with their job, all business. We were taken through the game by the Director, Shun Nakamura and Producer, Masahiro Kumono, who demoed two levels and answered an epic number of questions. The presentation was

certainly strong, but we couldn't help but think that perhaps even Sonic Team aren't completely sure how to move this series forwards. But first things first — let's talk about the levels we saw.

GRINDING AND ZIPPING

The first was Kingdom Valley, a panoramic trip along raised stone roads and moss covered ancient ruins, framed by craggy mountainsides, castles and a dense foreboding sky. As you'd expect Sonic hits bounce pads and speed panels, tackles huge jumps, runs along walls and grinds rails, but the team also showed off a number of new moves.

You can now grind what appears to be turbulence in the air — think the half pipe-like wake left by boarders in Sonic Riders and you'd be on the right track. You can also 'ride' paths of rings in mid-air, using them to zip across large gaps, and bounce off ropes to get extra height. In keeping with previous Adventure games the sense of speed and scale is incredible, but most of the coolest moves are on-rails, such as a section with massive wall jumps between broken sections of some ancient stone structure, and hitching a ride with an eagle.

When it comes to combat, Sonic seems to interact with Eggman's army of robots in much the same way as previous games, although with the implementation of havok physics Sonic Team have tried to make things feel more dynamic, so in many places you can send enemies flying into stone walls which shatter

There will be no difference in content or visuals between PS3 and Xbox 360 according to Sonic Team. Online is confirmed for both but no details have been revealed yet.

into their component blocks. It seemed a little gimmicky in the context of the demo, but we suspect that they'll probably make that kind of environmental interaction more interesting by the time they finalise the level designs.

While the gameplay of Kingdom Valley was still very much the on-rails Sonic Adventure brand of action, there were plenty of different paths the player could take, so we're expecting a fair dose of replay value as you try and hit every line in each level. Plus, there was a spectacular waterfall sequence towards the end of the level that will doubtless have gamers coming back for another taste.

POST APOCALYPTIC

The other level we were demoed was Crisis City, and where Kingdom Valley was kind of like a forgotten and mystical land, Crisis City is an urban heart attack - a dose of apocalyptic imagery delivered as only the Japanese know how. Not just a clever name in other words. In Crisis City you're in amongst the wreckage of a once great city, surrounded by the smoking burnt out shells of skyscrapers, where lava runs through the streets and a colossal whirlwind hovers forebodingly in the distance. Windows shatter and platforms fall as explosions rock the ground, and flames lick at your boots. It's a very cool looking level, and while the robot enemies arguably looked a little out of place in Kingdom Valley

they're right at home here, and you'll come across more varied opposition, from large bipedal mechs that can fire a full volley of heat seeking missiles to smaller spidery bots that roll around Phantom Menace style.

Crisis City also served as our introduction to the new character, Silver the Hedgehog. How is he different? He can hover for a certain distance for one, but his defining trait is telekinesis. At a basic level this means picking up cars and flinging them at enemies, or using the large metal balls that litter the city to destroy elements of the environment to create a new path forward. Cooler still, that volley of missiles I mentioned? You can freeze them in mid-air and send them back to meet their maker. Sweet. Or how about hopping on top of a car and propelling yourself down the street? Or bending apart the bars of a gate to get through?

Unfortunately though, a lot of his most powerful abilities are tightly scripted, so while looking cool there's little player skill required. For instance, there are points at the end of metal structural beams that are highlighted by a glowing green swirl. Stand there and hit the relevant button and Silver will bend the metal down to create a giant spring that will flip him across the level. And a little like Magneto from the X-Men Silver can manipulate large chunks of level to create new platforms to cross - although once again you can only do this while on a green glowing point.

There's a hell of a lot going on in this level, and like Kingdom Valley you get a great sense of scale — not just from the draw distance, but also from the many bounce pads that catapult you high into the sky, affording a truly panoramic view. The real test, however, will be how intuitively the psychic abilities work, and whether they really bring meaningful variety to the gameplay.

One order of crispy fried hedgehog coming right up…

First there was Gold Mario, now Silver Sonic. What's next? Bronze Bandicoot?

HAPPY BIRTHDAY SONIC

It's also going to be interesting to see whether Sonic Team can capitalise on Silver from a story perspective. Now, normally we wouldn't really bother talking about the story in a Sonic game, but the team repeatedly told us that they wanted the story to be dramatic, in a bigger, deeper world full of real characters. Fair enough, but the way they're going about it is, well, interesting.

Here's what we know of the story so far. The game takes place in Soleanna, a beautiful Venetian inspired city. Sonic befriends the princess of the land Elise, who is of course, kidnapped by Dr Eggman (sigh) who is after the secret of "disaster flame" whatever that may be. We'd wager it has something to do with Chaos Emeralds. Anyway, Sonic vows to rescue the princess but Silver the Hedgehog travels back from the future (no really) to try and stop him, calling him the "Iblis Trigger". Now, since we know that you get to play as Silver (as well as Shadow — although this hasn't been officially confirmed), he's not necessarily a bad guy, so we're expecting a few surprises as the plot is unravelled.

A pretty typical storyline for a Sonic game yes? Well the twist is that this game takes place in the 'real' world, with Sonic and co interacting with actual humans. Yes, just like Sonic X. That's obviously why Crisis City is set in a very realistic looking city, which is fine, but we're just not convinced that bringing Sonic into the real world is such a great idea. For one, although Sonic, Eggman and co have been redesigned (see boxout) they're still going to look jarring next to the incredibly realistically rendered human characters. The Princess Elise, for instance, is wonderfully modelled — she's incredibly detailed, slender and pretty... but nothing like Sonic and co. And get this, the team even mentioned the possibility of a romantic angle to the story. I jokingly suggested that it was about time Sonic and Eggman got together, but the alternative is only slightly less ridiculous.

We'll have to reserve judgement until we play it, though we can tell you that you will be interacting with the denizens of the world more than in many other Sonic games. The team have brought back the concept of the Adventure Stage - the hub world(s) from which you accessed levels - from Sonic Adventure. This time it's known as the Town Stage, and while you won't necessarily return to it after every mission, it will play an important role in the game. It's apparently much larger than Sonic Adventure's areas, and allows you to explore at your own pace and talk to the many NPCs.

So the story and world are obviously important for the team, but in addition to trying to move the series forward, they're also looking back. As I mentioned earlier, this year marks the 15th anniversary of Sonic the Hedgehog, so one of the goals for the project was to look back to past titles, both in the sense of trying to recapture the essence of the series, but quite possibly also in terms of revisiting locations from previous games. Playing a remake of Green Hill Zone at a blistering 60fps with incredibly rendered 3D surroundings would definitely be cool, but the real question is - can Sonic Team deliver a Sonic game that retains the speed and intensity of the past, while also packing a drama and intrigue-filled storyline set in the real world? We'll find out later this year. «
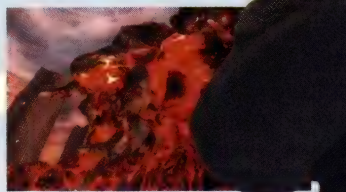
Pan & James

God bless any country where you can walk into a DVD store and ask the person behind the counter for "a DVD where a monkey rides a dog" and they know exactly what you're talking about. Even though the monkey only walks the dog (lying Germans). Yes, that was the ease with which I found the holy grail of the trip, the pride of my DVD collection, the continuing adventures of Pan and James. For those that don't know, this loveable duo are a chimp and a dog who have adventures. Real life adventures, where they buy cheesecake and experience life's highs and lows. It's hard to do justice in words to just how awesome this DVD series is, so we've taken some grabs to paint a more hilarious picture.

Redesign a go go

In order for Sonic and co to more seamlessly interact with the humans in the game, the characters have been redesigned. While Sonic looks quite similar, apart from noticeably longer legs, Dr Eggman's redesign is much more obvious, and he certainly looks less comical and more human.

ALONE IN THE DARK™

BY ED DAWSON

Survival horror is one genre that really needs a shot in the arm. It's been a faithful servant of console gamers for many years, but like many other genres in the videogame pantheon, it needs an urgent facelift. Some real brain-work. Someone has to bet the farm on a bold, innovative new survival horror game and Eden Games look set to be that operation, with their new entrant in the Alone in the Dark series. As you probably know, the original Alone in the Dark game kick-started the entire survival horror genre, which is now more associated with series' like Resident Evil and Silent Hill. The Eden Games team expressed the opinion that there hasn't been much innovation in the area for years, apart from (specifically) Resident Evil 4. We visited their office in Lyon, France to find out exactly how they're hoping to change that, and what they're creating for this new world order.

[below] Oh what a feelin', he's dancing on the ceilin'...

HISTORY IN THE DARK

Alone in the Dark is more than just a classic survival horror series. It's also a bankable franchise, having sold 1.5 million copies in its last excursion to market. Concerned about honouring the history and cachet of this much-loved series, our first order of business was to ask about the involvement of the original designer, the famous Frederick Raynal who created Alone in the Dark (and the Twinsen's adventure games) in the 90s.

Although we were disappointed to learn that Frederick isn't working on the new Alone in the Dark, his influence is certainly there, as some of his key staff from earlier games are toiling away on the game. As it turns out, many of the staff at Eden Games once worked on the Twinsen games with Frederick Raynal at Adeline Software, then following that, the subsequent Raynal company No-Cliché. After No-Cliché folded, many of the staff attained positions at Eden Games. On top of this, David Nadal, the game's Creative Director, knows Frederick quite well, so he met with him for a secret meeting to discuss possibilities around a future Alone in the Dark sequel. Any concerns

about the series' history ought to be placated by that calming revelation. If anything, the team at Eden Games are set to out-shine the original Alone in the Dark legacy and create some gaming history of their very own.

STORY IN THE DARK

Being a survival horror game, there are — of course - monsters and a narrative explanation for them, but this is a game with more than just spring loaded cats. The themes Alone in the Dark explores are an original fusion of religion, paranormal beliefs in various cultures and the literature surrounding near-death experiences. According to the Eden Games team, the story essentially explores the question: "What is after death"? Our hero, Edward Carnby is undertaking a paranormal investigation, uncovering some yet-to-be-revealed secrets surrounding the appearance of vicious beasts in New York.

Indeed, it's the setting that is one of the most enticing aspects of the game. From the single-scene, cinematic camera angles of corridors and ballrooms, Alone in the Dark has evolved to a massive free-roaming space, four kilometres by eight hundred metres across. This is Central Park in New York, present

THE ART ROOM

Walking around the "Art Room" at Eden Games, the walls were literally covered with concept art for Alone in the Dark. We weren't allowed to take pictures of it, but rest assured, the imagery was awesome. Something we will mention however, was a little note next to images of the human characters in the game. It was a label: the NPC characters were each numbered with "SECTAIRE 01", "SECTAIRE 02", and so on. The team did tell us earlier that the story is advanced through various characters, who may be in competition with each other. We asked probing questions about it, but the team remained mum for fear of giving away game secrets too early in the PR process. Translated to English, sectaire means "sectarian", meaning a member of a sect who is intolerant of the views of any other sect. One thing's for sure: this game sure has a lot of "sects" in it! It could be that there are various teams or alliances ("sects") that the player comes into contact with in his quest to survive the harsh environment. Whatever the

day, 2006-2007, on a dark and forbidding night: a place where even the Police are reluctant to tread. In tangled, overgrown corners of the park, there are places no sane person would explore alone. The Eden team described this new freedom as breaking the rules of "being in a narrow corridor", which is obviously a big cliché in survival horror.

Alone in the Dark is also being designed with primarily "action-oriented gameplay", and the game's motto is: "Survive at all costs!". The team stressed that they are striving to combine elements of frustration, fear and entertainment. They also wanted to implement "logical game rules", allowing players to apply lessons they've learned from real life in the game. "Everything is interactive!" they said. Perhaps that's an exaggeration, but as we watched the action on screen, there seemed to be an unusual amount of interactive or at least physics-affected objects. Also, the game supports some of the early physics acceleration cards.

DANCER IN THE DARK

We sat down with Eden's lead game designer on Alone, Herwe Sliwa, for a hands-on session with the game. The opening cutscene shows chaos breaking out on the streets. Exploding cars leave the surrounding area consumed by flames. We see for a twisted moment, the skull of a beast stretching outward, as if trying to break through its own skin. Our character is trapped in an apartment, as fire slowly demolishes it. Concrete explodes in vicious shock waves and walls fall outward, crashing to the street below. Rooms tilt and objects tumble. Sliding out of the room, Edward hangs from the face of the skyscraper as the room and large partitions of the building fall.

It's an impressive opening that neatly segues back into gameplay, with Edward being forced to climb up the outside of the building (which

is still burning). Periodically, large flaming objects and chunks of debris fall from the façade, narrowly missing the player (and requiring a quick dodge manoeuver!).

What was striking about this sequence was the acrobatic flexibility of the player. There are numerous new climbing, jumping and rope-swinging abilities that just flow naturally and add a fresh dynamic edge to the game. For example, when you're climbing the building's face, you grab onto one end of a severed power line. While holding onto that, you can of course climb up and down, but also run along the building's face left and right, kung-fu style, to build up a powerful swing. Using that, you can leap a greater distance and reach farther. Also, as you're climbing that power line, it gets snagged on objects above, such as an air conditioner. When the fire burns the air conditioner's supports, it comes tumbling down (and can kill you). But of course as it falls, the power line slips behind it and changes your centre of gravity, snagging on another object and suddenly lowering you a few feet and swinging you away to one side. But there's more! You can also jump out from the wall, to shift the rope (or power line) over the top of objects it's caught on. It seems like an obvious mechanism, but these common-sense innovations to the game make it look very intuitive and enjoyable. They're also the kind of key innovations that you rarely see. Eden Games are obviously setting out to make a name for themselves as innovators who are not afraid to break new ground.

Although some elements were unfinished and lacking final art, those that were polished were drop-jaw stunning, while even the roughest parts showed great innovation and ingenuity, making the game look very engaging, even in its early state.

[top] Even an extreme makeover ain't going to help this guy...

One feature that amazed us (surprisingly) was the immersive inventory system. The camera snaps to first person, then pans down to Edward's chest. The view shows the player's arms holding his jacket wide open, allowing you to browse through items and weapons hooked into holsters and straps arranged along the jacket lining. No labels or intrusive text popped into the view: you simply look at the object to identify it and choose it. Having chosen something, the character's hands replace any object being held and swap it for the new one, smoothly and in a convincing amount of time. The camera then pans upward to return to a typical first person perspective view of the room. This total departure from a two-dimensional 'inventory screen' is a fantastic innovation, and as you're looking through your items, the game world keeps rendering continuously in the background. In our view, a fire was smouldering near the player's left foot, dynamic light continued to flicker across the floor and the sound of police sirens wailing in the background continued.

Speaking of realism and immersion, when shooting (with a sweet-looking automatic pistol in this case), the player looks down his arm, through the 'iron sights' at enemy targets nearby. The Eden team kept mum about the weapons in the game, but we saw images with at least a Desert Eagle pistol as well as two submachine guns, the stylish MAC-10 and Uzi models.

So the small touches that will keep the player immersed in the gameworld are there, but what about the more significant aspects? They're covered too. Sliwa explained that the team were customising the gameplay in Alone in the Dark to include multiple solutions and encourage "emergent behaviour" by supplying the player with a number of tools at their disposal and allowing various possibilities to arise. He also showed us how, during narrative elements of the game, the player is free to move around, rather

[above] It's like a Giger orgy and everyone's invited!

than locking you into position while another character delivers a lecture. All cutscenes for the game run "live" in the game engine, with scripted elements. During these, the player can choose between a dynamic or roving camera view. Whether this mechanic allows you to alter cutscene events in a meaningful way, however, remains to be seen.

What we do know is that Alone in the Dark uses multiple rendering passes to get the maximum quality in the live rendered scenes. This includes extraordinary facial expressions and light source reflections on character's eyeballs, such as a flaming bonfire, as well as real time tuning of rendering, including precise lighting control, which they demonstrated for us. They can easily tweak a light's brightness, hue and saturation, as well introduce "post-effects" like motion blur, camera shake, depth-of-field focus on the character and background, while the game is rendering in real time.

Coming back to the gameplay, the lead game designer Herew Sliwa did mention that depending on your treatment of NPCs, they may be friendly to your character or act in competition with him. Their allegiance will also be linked to interesting moral choices that fit into the game's unique fusion of beliefs and religions.

For example, he said if you encounter a player who is being attacked, you can choose to get involved or simply watch from a safe distance. Should you assist them or not? Should you save them or kill them? These choices influence the game's sequence and events.

The game is not so elastic that it has alternate endings, but it does have varied experiences depending on the cadre of NPCs that you accumulate during the game.

INNOVATION IN THE DARK
We asked David Nadal about the experiments included in the game's design and structure. In the current atmosphere of stagnated game designs, did brandishing a brash and potentially risky project create any difficulties when pitching the idea to publishers?

David conceded that initially, the concept was "very difficult" to pitch. They had carefully created many revisions of their initial design documentation and supporting arguments, to hammer home the benefits of each innovation decision they were making (and hopefully win over the executives at publishing companies). However, he noted that Atari have been very supportive of the concept and a great partner to make the game with. "For us, it is about innovation," he said.

While the team are keeping huge swathes of the game 'in the dark' for the time being, what we saw was hugely impressive, and makes this title one to look out for, with both eyes open. <<

TECHNICAL MUMBO JUMBO

One technology the programming team highlighted is Polynomial Texture Mapping, a new technique apparently superior to bump mapping or normal mapping, combining the results from hundreds of rendered images in Maya.

Characters in AitD feature two to three million polygons each in the development phase, which is honed down to only ten thousand in the live game code. The Polynomial Texture Mapping function allows them to retain much of the appearance of that incredible detail, without the performance lag that would surely result from using the fully-detailed original.

Eden Games are also using a new 'blendshapes' technique that uses 20 to 30 preset facial expressions, then creates convincing 'tween' animations between them. Thus, they can manipulate characters' faces between many expressions without having to store a gigantic amount of animation data.

Looking at the intensely realistic character models and animations, I asked if they had 3D scanned any of the Eden Games team as characters into Alone in the Dark. "Good question." chuckled Creative Director David Nadal. "Yes we have. Not as main heroes, but players who are squished, squashed, smashed." While I was there, I saw one artist working laboriously on a complex model, tweaking tiny animation elements on a character. The character's head and torso were gouged open by a massive wound that ran from forehead to bellybutton. As he worked on it and played it back, tiny droplets of blood formed in the wound and ran realistically along its grooves, as though appearing only moments after the terrible impact of some large weapon. This is going to be one hell of a ride...

Medieval Total War

SYSTEM: **PC** ■ CATEGORY: **STRATEGY** ■ PLAYERS: **1-MULTI** ■ DEVELOPER: **CREATIVE ASSEMBLY** ■ DUE: **NOVEMBER 06**

The year is 1080. Chivalric knights bear their standards aloft, claiming the justice of the Lord True God as their own, conquering foreign lands for church and king. Flash forward half a millennium or so. It's 1530, the time of the chivalric knights is over and in their place we have professional armies of career soldiers wielding muskets. It's the last truly romantic period of Western warfare and the setting of the upcoming turn based/real time strategy game Medieval 2: Total War.

TACTICAL TOOSE

When Shogun: Total War first appeared all those years ago it was something of a revolution in gameplay combining both turn based and real time gameplay into one experience. Medieval and Rome extended on this successful formula adding more units, gameplay depth and obvious graphical upgrades. Medieval 2: Total War goes a step further again, promising one of the most engrossing tactical experiences we've seen.

Whereas traditionally the Total War series has been based around building cities and armies, Medieval 2 mixes things up a bit by requiring players to build cities and castles. Cities play the economic base of the game. Through them players make money, grow populations, increase technology, promote trade and run the day to day affairs of their faction. Castles are for war. All recruitment of real combat troops (basic troops are available in cities) is done through castles. Unlike the previous games in which troops and other units were built one at a time, Medieval 2 will allow players to build multiple units simultaneously at the one location on the proviso that they have enough training facilities, resources and recruits, the last of which being

Duvet style horse barding proved to be flawed in the field

a renewable resource based on the size of the castle's population. Town and cities are free to grow with population but castles must by definition be walled structures, limiting the maximum population. The enforced population limit should make it difficult, if not impossible for players to "zerg" campaign or multiplayer opponents with large numbers of quickly recruited, cheap troops.

TOTAL TOOSE

Cities and castles look a good deal more organic in Medieval 2: Total War, with curved streets, pleasantly chaotic building placement and nary a sense of the oppressive boxiness of the cities in Medieval and Rome. Everything in these cities

and castles will be destructible in some manner; maybe not on a brick by brick basis but they will definitely fall down in chunks. Creative Assembly were good enough to demonstrate what could happen to a city under Trebuchet bombardment. Walls crumbled, roofs collapsed, buildings even caught on fire as the flames were flung from the hearth by the heavy boulders. Definitely an impressive spectacle.

A good deal of work has gone into the look and feel of the units in Medieval 2: Total War to make them feel more unique and realistic. Each troop model is being built with a number of variables in terms of heraldry, armour and stance making for a variety of different looks for individual units. This should go a long way to eliminating the

2.

To arms men! We must repel the giant pennant!

Business is War

Trade has been greatly modified in Medieval 2: Total War. Across the map are resource nodes such as spice or silk which players are able to take advantage of by sending a Merchant unit to that position. By having a merchant positioned on all of the resource nodes of one type in an area – such as London based merchants being placed on all of the silk resource nodes near Constantinople – the player can create trade monopolies for even more income. Both distance and the local availability of the resource determine the value. Unlike nearly every other transaction in Medieval 2, Trade is not considered a faction transaction so it is entirely possible to have merchants in enemy faction territory. This doesn't mean that the opposing faction's merchants can't hire independent mercenaries to destroy your holdings without declaring war. Of course, this means you can do exactly the same thing to them.

"It's the last truly romantic period of Western warfare"

Who made Steve Guttenberg a star?

OK, the Stonecutters may not be a real guild but the Masons are and they, like a number of other guilds may take an interest in your faction throughout the course of Medieval 2: Total War. If a guild takes an interest in your faction they may request to build a chapter house, guild hall or even headquarters in one of your cities. Each city can only be the home of one guild at a time but having guild presence will give the city bonuses to certain tasks; having a Masonic Lodge for example will give the player discounts on the cost of masonry, a real boon for erecting buildings and castles. We currently have no details on the number and variety of guilds but we look forward to finding out.

Running with scissors may be dangerous but pikes are fair game

"clone army" look of the previous games. Units will also animate better as a group instead of performing the same action repeatedly. Examples we were shown included swordsmen intuitively blocking attacks, performing combos and attacks relative to the enemy faced and even performing finishing blows as well as pikemen positioning themselves so that different ranks held their pikes at different levels, essentially creating a terrifying wall of death for cavalry.

In keeping with chivalric tradition, troops can also become a viable source of income. Enemy troops that is. After a battle, Medieval 2: Total War encourages players to actively follow and mop up routing enemies as captured soldiers can be ransomed back to the losing faction for a good amount of gold and maybe a bit of a chivalric reputation. Of course, you could choose to slaughter the prisoners to raise your Dread instead. Chivalry and Dread are new reputations for generals in Medieval 2. Simply put, Chivalry is a bonus to troop morale and Dread is a penalty to

opposing troop morale. Naturally the mechanic will run deeper than that and may influence the way that factions interact but without seeing more we couldn't really say.

DIPLOMATOOSE
One of the biggest changes to the old Total War mechanics is how diplomacy now works. In previous games diplomatic events were something of a craps-shoot as the player was never really able to gauge whether or not a deal will be successfully resolved until all was said and done and it was too late to go back. This made diplomacy not the most viable route for taking over the known world. Hyper's own ex-alum Dan Toose is in charge of the development of the new diplomatic system and it's truly a different beast. During all negotiations, players will be able to keep a track of how the other side is taking their offers and demands making it a great deal easier to balance offers so both sides get what they want. Players will also be able to see how rich a

country is when entering into economic demands, once again making transactions a good deal smoother as demanding 1000 florins a month from a poor country is likely to cause problems unlike a rich country who may shell out the cash with impunity. What's more, each diplomatic session will feature voice acting that will give players aural clues as to the disposition of the other party making the whole interface more intuitive.

The above may make diplomacy sound like an easy way to sneak in and attack people after making friends but the improved faction AI should put a stop to that. The factional AI will remember your actions throughout the game so if you develop a reputation as a deal-breaker or a traitor not only may factions be less willing to deal with you but they may also align themselves with other factions to wipe you off the map! Political marriages between eligible nobility will once again be available in Medieval 2 though this time with an improved interface. «

A great tactic vs cavalry or an army of clumsy vampires

The Movies

After a huge amount of fan outcry, Creative Assembly have decided to reintroduce the assassination and spying movies that appeared in Shogun: Total War. That's right, every time you attempt to spy on an opposing faction or assassinate an enemy the player will be screened one of a number of pre-rendered films showing the outcome. Definitely more entertaining than a scroll with a dry old bit of text.

JUST CAUSE

Spanish pants and guns-akimbo are all the rage in South America, or so says **Ed Dawson...**
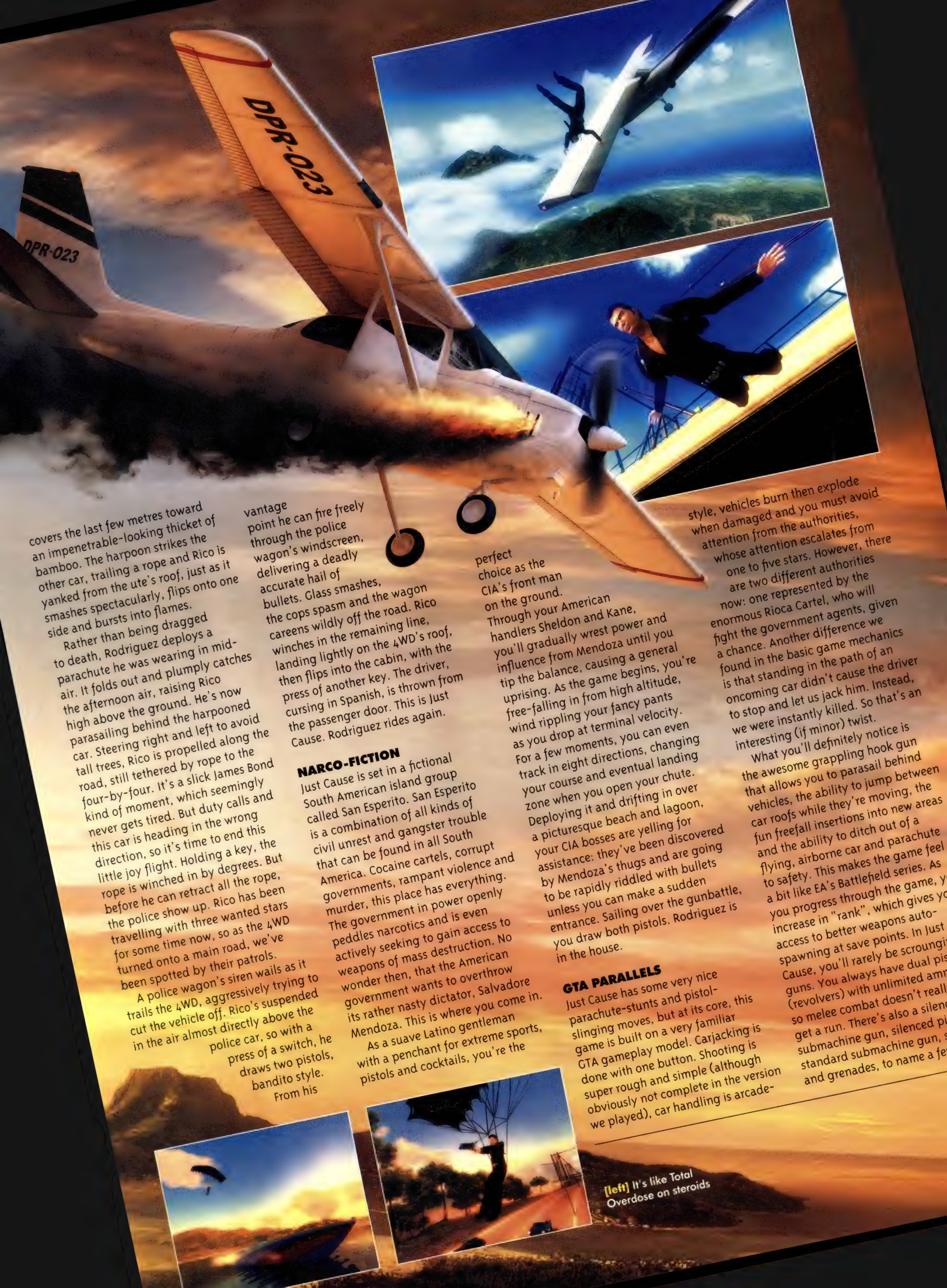
>> You're driving a rusty utility through a teeming tropical jungle road, down a winding one-lane road. It's battered, smoking and various panels are hanging off the chassis, flapping in the draught of your passage. Ahead on the road, you see a shmick-looking four-wheel drive. Oh yes, this is what you've been waiting for. As it approaches, you steer slightly off centre, then boldly climb onto the roof of the ute, crouching there with the expert stance of a stuntman. Our hero is presentably dressed in black evening wear, tight-fitting black trousers, black shirt and pointy black shoes, matching his shock of wavy black hair. The ute careens, wobbling slightly, but stays generally on course. It's no longer a car: it's a runaway accident waiting to happen. As it rattles gradually off the road, the other car passes, steering around it. Our protagonist, Rico Rodriguez, whips out a grappling hook launcher at the press of a button. He fires at the passing car, which is probably doing a relative 100 kph or more. It whistles past, as our ute

SYSTEM: **PC, PS2, XBOX, XBOX 360** ■ CATEGORY: **ACTION** ■ PLAYERS: 1 ■ DEVELOPER: **AVALANCHE STUDIOS** ■ DUE: Q4 2006

covers the last few metres toward an impenetrable-looking thicket of bamboo. The harpoon strikes the other car, trailing a rope and Rico is yanked from the ute's roof, just as it smashes spectacularly, flips onto one side and bursts into flames.

Rather than being dragged to death, Rodriguez deploys a parachute he was wearing in mid-air. It folds out and plumply catches the afternoon air, raising Rico high above the ground. He's now parasailing behind the harpooned car. Steering right and left to avoid tall trees, Rico is propelled along the road, still tethered by rope to the four-by-four. It's a slick James Bond kind of moment, which seemingly never gets tired. But duty calls and this car is heading in the wrong direction, so it's time to end this little joy flight. Holding a key, the rope is winched in by degrees. But before he can retract all the rope, the police show up. Rico has been travelling with three wanted stars for some time now, so as the 4WD turned onto a main road, we've been spotted by their patrols.

A police wagon's siren wails as it trails the 4WD, aggressively trying to cut the vehicle off. Rico's suspended in the air almost directly above the police car, so with a press of a switch, he draws two pistols, bandito style. From his vantage point he can fire freely through the police wagon's windscreen, delivering a deadly accurate hail of bullets. Glass smashes, the cops spasm and the wagon careens wildly off the road. Rico winches in the remaining line, landing lightly on the 4WD's roof, then flips into the cabin, with the press of another key. The driver, cursing in Spanish, is thrown from the passenger door. This is Just Cause. Rodriguez rides again.

NARCO-FICTION

Just Cause is set in a fictional South American island group called San Esperito. San Esperito is a combination of all kinds of civil unrest and gangster trouble that can be found in all South America. Cocaine cartels, corrupt governments, rampant violence and murder, this place has everything. The government in power openly peddles narcotics and is even actively seeking to gain access to weapons of mass destruction. No wonder then, that the American government wants to overthrow its rather nasty dictator, Salvadore Mendoza. This is where you come in.

As a suave Latino gentleman with a penchant for extreme sports, pistols and cocktails, you're the perfect choice as the CIA's front man on the ground.

Through your American handlers Sheldon and Kane, you'll gradually wrest power and influence from Mendoza until you tip the balance, causing a general uprising. As the game begins, you're free-falling in from high altitude, wind rippling your fancy pants as you drop at terminal velocity. For a few moments, you can even track in eight directions, changing your course and eventual landing zone when you open your chute. Deploying it and drifting in over a picturesque beach and lagoon, your CIA bosses are yelling for assistance: they've been discovered by Mendoza's thugs and are going to be rapidly riddled with bullets unless you can make a sudden entrance. Sailing over the gunbattle, you draw both pistols. Rodriguez is in the house.

GTA PARALLELS

Just Cause has some very nice parachute-stunts and pistol-slinging moves, but at its core, this game is built on a very familiar GTA gameplay model. Carjacking is done with one button. Shooting is super rough and simple (although obviously not complete in the version we played), car handling is arcade-style, vehicles burn then explode when damaged and you must avoid attention from the authorities, whose attention escalates from one to five stars. However, there are two different authorities now: one represented by the enormous Rioca Cartel, who will fight the government agents, given a chance. Another difference we found in the basic game mechanics is that standing in the path of an oncoming car didn't cause the driver to stop and let us jack him. Instead, we were instantly killed. So that's an interesting (if minor) twist.

What you'll definitely notice is the awesome grappling hook gun that allows you to parasail behind vehicles, the ability to jump between car roofs while they're moving, the fun freefall insertions into new areas and the ability to ditch out of a flying, airborne car and parachute to safety. This makes the game feel a bit like EA's Battlefield series. As you progress through the game, you increase in "rank", which gives you access to better weapons auto-spawning at save points. In Just Cause, you'll rarely be scrounging. You always have dual pistols guns. You always have dual pistols (revolvers) with unlimited ammo, so melee combat doesn't really get a run. There's also a silenced submachine gun, silenced pistol, standard submachine gun, and grenades, to name a few.

CONVENIENCE IN GAMING

Convenience seems to be a recurring theme for the player in Just Cause. If you're ever too far away from your desired location, you can call for an extraction. This takes the form of a helicopter pickup, to take you straight to a safe house or mission location. Also, when Rodriguez gets wounded, you can simply crouch and hide for a few minutes, whereby his health will rapidly regenerate. In fact, even during a continuous gun battle, you'll recover quite a lot of health. In the version we played, it's fairly difficult to die by gunfire when compared to GTA, but only the retail version will show us the final state of the combat mechanics.
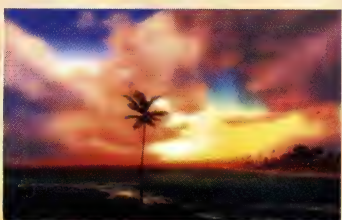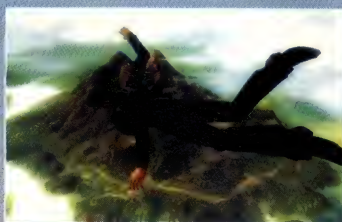
[right] At the Copa, Copacabana

[below] As they say in Latin America "el 'splosion!"

MENDOOOZAAAA!!

Just Cause has some great battles where you're fighting alongside NPC players.

To control the land, you'll need to take ownership of various villages. When you arrive, the town is plastered with posters of Mendoza and his government flag is raised in the town square and posted in windows, on walls, on leaflets on the ground—all around the place. To fight for a village, you load yourself up with guns and then visit the local resistance hideout. You let them know that the fight is on, then they mobilise: and you fight to the central town square. On the way, you have to fight through dozens of enemies including paramilitary barricades and ambushes, but you've got many peasant militia with rifles on your side, who back you up every step of the way. Finally, when you take the square and repel a counterattack, the town is yours. All those propaganda papers, flags and posters that once showed the dictator's symbols are now converted to the resistance movement's icons, representing freedom from oppression (hopefully).

In one of these battles, I had retained a heavy armoured car from a previous mission where I was assassinating a local politician. The armoured car was his escort, so I had harpooned it and taken control. Mounted on the roof is a heavy machine gun, which is a second seat in the vehicle. I parked the armoured car near the fight and instigated the battle. Getting back into the gun turret, I hosed down some helicopters and the first wave of government stooges, who were auto-tracked by the gun, almost instantly killed. But what I didn't expect was one of my peasant militia buddies to jump into the driver's seat and move us forward into the battle, where I could hit another wave of "policia" who advanced from another angle. But they parked the nose of the vehicle against a wall, so I got out and started driving forward to continue the advance. To my surprise, another peasant jumped into the gun turret and started chopping away at the enemies with it! This proved to be quite an effective strategy, allowing the majority of our peasant buddies to survive and move aggressively into the town centre. I'm not sure to what extent this friendly AI will be developed, but it certainly seems more or less on par with your human allies in games like Halo.

CARIBBEAN LANDSCAPE

The island archipelago of San Esperito covers 37 individual islands, which you must convert to the cause. Along the way you have twenty story missions to complete, which sounds fairly short, but we are assured that many of these missions have multiple parts and will take a considerable time to complete. The actual game world was originally going to be outrageously massive, the size of a medium African country. However, problems arose when trying to test such a giant area and make sure it all worked smoothly for the game. They've settled on an area 32x32 kilometres, which is still fairly large, with no loading at any time. Hell, there's still over seven million trees in the landscape at that size.

Just Cause also has a good dose of variety in the environment with over one hundred distinct vehicles (including a 747 jet and an underwater scooter), twenty-five weapons and "shooter on rails" scripted missions. Just Cause certainly isn't lacking for features. The only question is, will they be enough to challenge GTA, or the next free-roaming action game? Watch this space.

[above] This is what happens when you don't wear a seat belt. True story!

[left] Always remember to obey the road rules

DESTROY ALL HUMANS! 2

>> Pandemic Studios Australia recently took the wraps off the sequel to one of the most entertaining cow juggling games of last year, Destroy All Humans! We were there with our truth ray to ask Creative Director John Passfield and Lead Designer Brad Welch some probing questions...

The 1950s setting of the original was ripe for lampooning sci-fi genre classics and the general climate of paranoia at the time. Tell us about the move to a sixties setting for Destroy All Humans 2.

Brad: We wanted to take Destroy all Humans around the globe, and swinging, jetsetting 60s have a real international vibe, whereas the 50s was a very American vibe. Also there's a lot of good material to parody in the 60s — the cold war, giant monster movies, Bond flicks, all that stuff.

What elements did the team identify as the greatest strengths and weaknesses of the original and how have these factored into development of the sequel?

John: The one thing that everybody raved about in the first game was the laugh-out-loud humour. For the sequel we've got all the original actors and writers back and loaded the game with tons of new jokes and one liners. It's easily made the game at least 135% funnier than the last one.

As for the biggest weakness of the first game I'd say it was probably the way missions flowed together. You had to return to the Mother Ship each time you completed or failed a mission which slowed down game flow. We've fixed this by making everything flow together seamlessly from how you complete missions to how you buy and upgrade your weapons — it's all done in the game world.

What new tools or abilities will Crypto have?

Brad: Crypto has four new weapons at his disposal, as well as some new goodies for the Saucer. He also has a few new mental abilities in his big alien head, for instance he can now Transmog cars into ammo pickups. On top of that, many of Crypto's toys from DAH are being enhanced and improved. Also we have really enhanced the way you upgrade both your weapons and abilities — you get a lot more choices as a player on how you want to upgrade both your weapons and your mental abilities!

How will these change the way the game is played or the kinds of objectives the player may be given?

Brad: The big change this time is we are integrating the scanning of thoughts into missions. As well as providing all the laughs they did in DAH, they now also provide important clues on how to solve a mission.

[up] And no Treat Williams in sight

We also have some slightly more adventurey (I think that's a word) elements in the game to complement the shooting — you can talk to more people than you could in DAH, and these funny conversation games are used to solve some of the missions. Of course, you still also get to destroy a lot of humans and blow stuff up!

WHAT WE'D LIKE TO SEE:
Probing, lots and lots of probing...

Death ray, hippies, you do the math

[up] Nice casual stance there tiger

Tell us about some of the locations for the game.

John: We had a lot of requests from fans for Crypto to travel the world and we've delivered that in spades. Each of the new locations fits in perfectly with the sixties theme and offers brand new challenges. For example we have the "free loving" hippie infested Bay City which looks remarkably like San Francisco, even down to an island-prison turned tourist attraction. There's Albion, a riff on London complete with Tower Bridge, Nelson's Column and Double Decker buses, and Takoshima, a small Japanese island complete with James Bond style volcano and a city just ripe for giant monster action.

Each location has its own unique visual style and mood so you really do feel like you're travelling the world.

The side-missions in the original were a whole lot of fun. Can you tell us about any of the new ones?

Brad: We have many more side missions than in DAH, and we are integrating them into the main game in a lot of fun ways. We have one type of side mission which is called Ruin Lives — these are lots of fun, you have to expose someone's darkest secret, in public, thus getting their exploits onto the front page of the newspaper. RESULT: one human life... RUINED!

We had a lot of fun with the physics in the original — juggling cows and the like. Have you thought about creating mini-games out of some of

Thank god it's not Kenny G

the kookier things you can do?

John: Definitely. We have a number of new physics based weapons that are a blast to play with. My current favourite is the Dislocator, an anti-gravity gun that turns people and vehicles into deadly projectiles. It's so much fun to offload the weapon into a traffic jam and watch the ensuing mayhem. There were some very cool

unlockable movies/extras in the original. What can we expect from the sequel?

Brad: We have similar sorts of unlockables to DAH, along with a few surprise extras. There's also cheats of various sorts to unlock.

Obviously current gen machines have a massive install base, but aren't you itching to explore

the possibilities of this series on next gen? If so, how would it be different?

John: We've had a great time pushing the PS2 and Xbox to their limits, but yes, we're keen to make our mark on the next gen platforms. As to what we'll do, well there is so much potential. Having cities brimming with even more humans to destroy and increasing the destructibility of the environments are obvious enhancements. But there are a few other surprises that we'd like to save until next time. We want you to have a blast playing Destroy All Humans! 2 first! «

Destroy all phallic buildings

TONY HAWK'S DOWNHILL JAM

While the next "proper" sequel in the Tony Hawk series is coming to a whole range of systems, the Nintendo Wii is going to be the odd system out, as it's getting its very own game — Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam. It's kind of like Tony Hawk-lite, focusing on racing from point A to point B as fast as you can, or if you'd prefer a snappier analogy, it's a lot like San Francisco Rush on a skateboard. We're talking downhill the whole way with stacks of alternate lines to explore and an emphasis placed on tricking to go faster.

Controls have been nicely pared back. You'll hold your Wii wand (as we've taken to calling it) side on — classic style (the team decided that holding it with one hand would be too tiring) and steer by tilting it left and right. You give it a shake to boost, and thrust it sharply left or right to punch opponents (although the developers may take this out). Importantly, you can do most of the hallmark tricks in the skating arsenal like crouch/ollie, spin, flip tricks, grind, transfer and wall ride through the face buttons and trigger, with some functions doubling up, but in a decent context sensitive way. Manuals are also in the game at this stage but the team are still deciding whether to keep them in.

The game runs at 60fps and while the visual approach is a little cartoony — especially the motley assortment of exaggerated characters, the game looks pretty decent, capturing a really good sense of speed through some cool environments. Locations revealed so far are San Francisco, Edinburgh, Hong Kong and Rio De Janeiro.

The modes that we know of at the moment are Speed Races, which are first to the finish line events in a field of four, Trick Attack, which requires you to hit a certain points total during the run, and Slalom, where you're weaving through checkpoint gates to get extra time. The game as a whole will have eight tiers of competition, with twelve events per tier and three medal ratings per event. As you play you'll level up your character (chosen from a field of eight — although there will be at least a couple of hidden characters) and unlock new boards (which are broken up into combat, speed and tricking categories).

While it may sound a little been there, done that to the more cynical gamers out there, the reality is that Downhill Jam is actually looking like a lot of fun, not least because tricks are still integral to this game, albeit in a different way to other Tony Hawk titles. In Downhill Jam, tricks and combos net you boost which in turns lets you go faster. Plus, the more advanced shortcuts will only be reachable through well timed grinds and wallrides, so you'll still have a big advantage if you nail combos. <<

BS Powerslide

FS Crail Slide

Sticker Slap
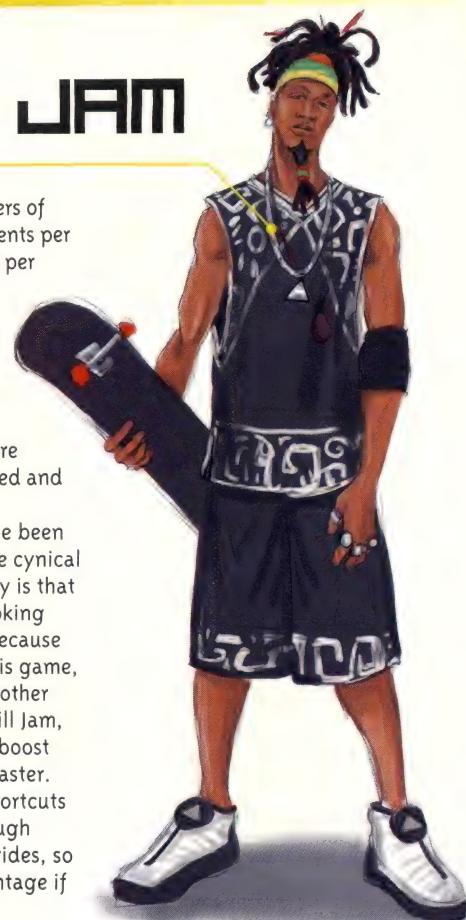
WHAT WE'D LIKE TO SEE:
Fewer goofy lifestyle shots with beautiful people playing silly buggers with the controller

Hang Ten Nosegrind

Wrap Around

Hang Ten Nosegrind? Beef megaphone cheesemonkey!

SYSTEM: **NINTENDO Wii** ■ CATEGORY: **RACING/SKATING** ■ PLAYERS: **1-4** ■ DEVELOPER: **TOYS FOR BOB** ■ DUE: **LATE 2006**

GOD HAND

>> In the delightfully garbled press release we received for God Hand, the genre of the game was described as "God Action". This brought to mind some pretty sweet images of controllable plagues, real time first born killings, smiting, condemning and enough begetting to make the OFLC blush. Unfortunately reading a bit further we discovered this was not actually the case. In reality, God Hand promises to be the game equivalent to over the top martial arts comedies like Shaolin Soccer and Kung Fu Hustle. To us that sounds even better. From what we are able to gather, the idea of the game goes something like this; a long time ago a great hero defeated a great evil and sealed it away. As a result his hands became infused with the power of God. Flash to the present time. A traveller with the rather non-heroic name of Jean tries to protect a woman being set upon by bandits. He is soundly beaten by

these powerful villains and in their quest to obtain the "God Hand", they cut off Jean's right hand. Our hero falls unconscious due to his wounds but when he awakes he finds the "God Hand" attached where his right hand once was.

A DEADLY BLOW AGAINST THE GROIN!!

Created by Clover Studios, the people behind the wonderful Viewtiful Joe series, God Hand is a single player beat 'em up of literally epic proportions. We don't know a great deal about the game at this time but from the screens and engrish we can deduce that the game will expand upon standard third person beat 'em ups with exaggerated physics, powers and an overriding sense of humour. With the power of the God Hand you can launch enemies into near orbit, knock down multiple enemies at once and perform exaggerated martial arts moves that would make Stephen Chow proud.

Most of the mechanics are still under wraps but we believe that Jean will have access to numerous moves that can be strung into custom combos, as well as evade and counterattack moves. Clover Studios are also quick to point out the fact that the humour of the game will be one of the most important features with comical scenes and moments being peppered throughout gameplay, including fight scenes. It can be fairly safely assumed that some of these comical fighting elements will include cutscenes of amusing enemy deaths if the player fulfils certain criteria, such as kicking them so high into the air they hit a plane or something equally over the top. It's been a while since we had a really good beat 'em up monopolising our time in the office. We can't wait to get playable code. <<
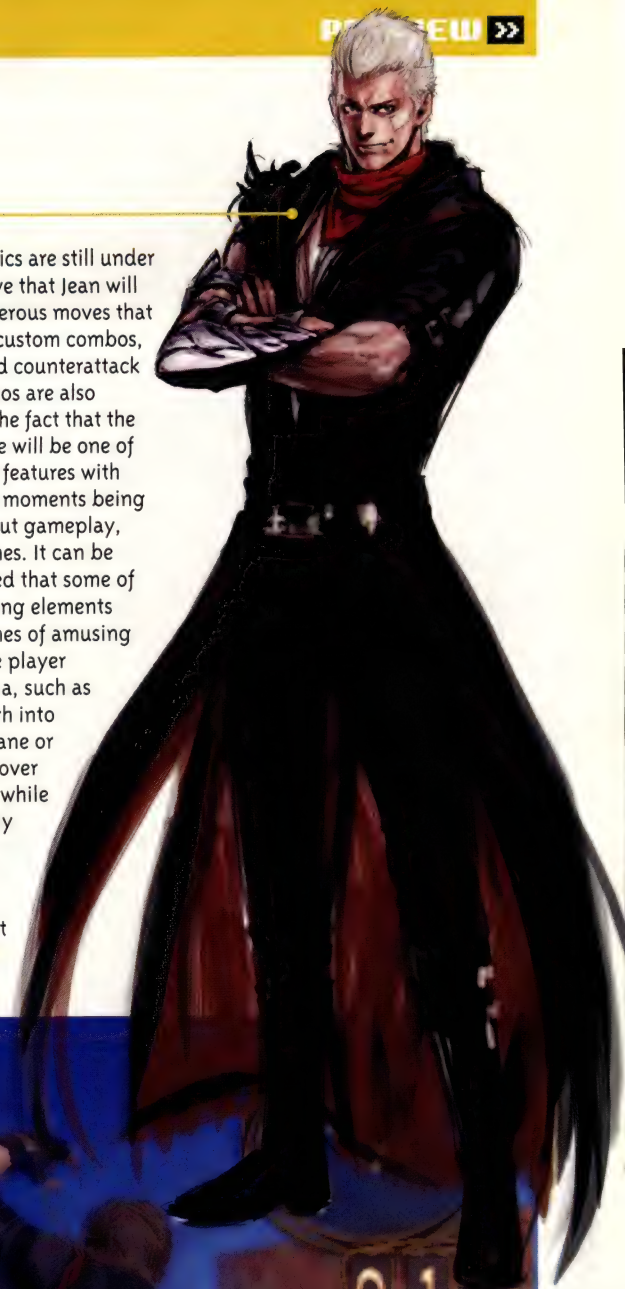
WHAT WE'D LIKE TO SEE:
The sequel to Kung Fu Hustle currently in development

God Knee just sounds goofy

SYSTEM: **PS2** CATEGORY: **GOD ACTION** PLAYERS: **1** DEVELOPER: **CLOVER STUDIOS** DUE: **TBA**

DDR:
Digital Distro Revolution
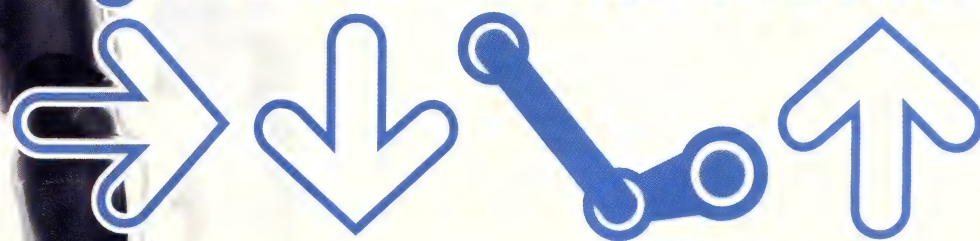
⇨⇨ **Seamus Byrne**

It's fun living at the start of a new century, and triple score for a new millennium. We all get the chance to dub ideas and technologies "so last millennium" or "truly 21st century" or "so hot right now" (the last more for Zoolander quote fanatics). Few technological shifts are more prone to this new/old divide than content distribution media.

The big talk right now, of course, is all about Blu-Ray and HD-DVD. Other even higher density formats based around holographic storage are also in the pipeline, with numbers pushing up over 3TB of storage. But screw all that, it's still based on physical exchange. The future is in bandwidth, and the exchange of content in pure, beautiful bitstreams!

IN THE BEGINNING

Gamers have been heavily involved with digital distribution since the days of BBS. Back then it was all about shareware. Apogee Games pioneered shareware games distribution via BBS back in the late 1980s. Starting back in 1986, Apogee developed the idea of producing games based on a three-instalment concept, with the later two parts available for purchase via mail order, while the first was freely distributed via download. Duke Nukem, now synonymous with games in eternal development hell, was originally an Apogee production launched through shareware (no, I'm talking about the original instalments, not the latest version — it hasn't been in development THAT long). Its successes led it to become a distributor of shareware games for other developers, including one id Software who released its classic Commander Keen

through Apogee's shareware method. Oh, and a little game called Wolfenstein 3D.

Of course, bandwidth was almost non-existent back in the late 80s and as games got bigger in the early 90s, downloads became more laborious for users. Add to this many concerns over the lack of revenue conversion on shareware, and this early phase in digital distribution began its decline. Shareware was rapidly replaced by the shorter demo distribution, which directed people toward retail boxed copies, and the retail store has dominated the game distribution scene ever since.

A difficulty in this early phase was a lack of any way to generate direct revenue over digital channels. It wasn't until we hit the modern phase of secure digital transactions that we finally saw any challenge to the retail store.

BEJEWELED THE BEDAZZLER

Casual games have been the quiet achiever in digital distribution. The casuals are a comfortable fit with the traditions of shareware and maintaining small download sizes to make it easy to download. Casual game developers also found some help from the portal boom of the first online tech bubble.

PopCap is a great example of the casual game digital distro success story. After its 2000 launch and the release of Diamond Mine, thanks in part

R.I.P. The Phantom 2003 – 2006(?)

How can we talk about digital distribution without mentioning the Phantom? Quite easily. This piece of work may have set the whole digital distribution game back a few years, after a hyped launch announcement drew attention to the subsequent mess of vaporous activity for what is essentially a closed-box PC with a subscription service for direct distribution gaming. Currently, the Phantom is even less than a ghost, being delayed "indefinitely" pending further funding. Don't put money on this Phantom making an appearance anytime soon…

to major exposure through a licensing deal with Microsoft to feature the game at MSN Games, the game, renamed Bejeweled, became one of the most successful casual games since Tetris. It has now sold more than 5 million licenses off the back of 150 million downloads.

Funnily enough, the biggest players of games available only via download are people who would never consider themselves gamers. And they're definitely not your average geeks who thrive on being at the head of this digital distribution evolutionary curve. But like all the hard drugs, these games know how to hook their devotees. Play a few levels for free in your web browser during a work lunch break, perhaps. Then you grab the .exe version to play now and then at home. Then you master the available levels, so you sign up for a registration code to unlock the extended version. It's a slippery, slippery slope.

The kind of slope a 'real' gamer rarely gets caught on, as they're already too busy with bigger fish on bigger platforms. Unlike the 10-15MB size of the bigger casual games, when we're talking about hundreds of megs and even the odd gig of data for big 3D games, digital distribution has just been seen as way too difficult to manage for such large scale games. That is, until Valve decided it was time to get their house in order.

STEAMING IN

Valve's launch of the Steam engine delivered a sting to the industry like a firecracker up the metaphorical butt of publishers everywhere. Perhaps not for what it has achieved thus far, but certainly for everything it represents. It arrived in 2002 first as a streamlined patch manager for the release of Counter-Strike 1.6, but then moved toward its fully formed state to include Valve's new multiplayer management system and the ability to distribute entire games.

So what happens when the developers of one of the most hotly anticipated sequels ever deliver a direct distribution system before its release? It gets its lawyers and its publisher's lawyers to throw down and a three-year legal battle ensues. The battles actually ran alongside the Steam developments at first, with accusations of copyright infringement aimed at Sierra (later bought by Vivendi while the cases continued) for cybercafé distribution issues as well as
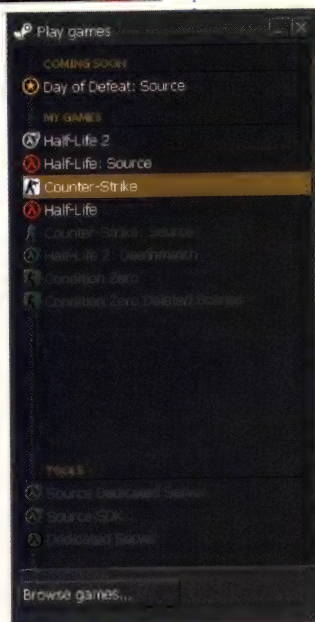
[top left]
Half-life 2, delivered Steam(ing) hot to your digital doorstep

[below]
Counter-Strike 1.6. "Hey man, squat down"

[bottom, left to right]
Duke Nukem II, Wolfenstein 3D, Commander Keen, Bejeweled… well duh

The Elder Scrolls IV
OBLIVION

breach of contract for withheld royalties. These were countered by Vivendi through a claim the Steam system was an attempt to circumvent their publishing agreements, thus bringing Steam into the heart of the matter. Vivendi aimed for a judgement that would prevent Valve from distributing Half-Life 2 via Steam, but final judgements went in favour of Valve and the game industry saw the first major title offered as a direct download to users, complete with a nice pre-load service so it was ready to play on the date of official release.

Half-Life 2 saw simultaneous release at retail and via Steam, but those opting for the digital edition found the digital revolution wasn't all smooth sailing just yet. At launch there were delays for many users due to authentication server issues, while there have been general concerns over the update system used that actually makes it difficult at times to even play Half-Life when offline, as Steam may want to run updates before letting you play.

In spite of these problems, Steam is currently a beacon for all developers keen to cut out the publisher middle man and go direct to desktops everywhere. The install base of Half-Life and Counter-Strike players is massive, and Valve has opened the doors to smaller developers with great results so far, for Introversion Software's Darwinia, in particular.

Impressive pricing regularly at the US$19.95 price point for games released via Steam makes it a very attractive proposition and reflects the low costs involved with such digital distribution. Whether in future this forces major publishers to reduce prices, or to offer similar pricing models through their own digital distribution systems, will be interesting to see.

Valve has in the past year moved to EA for its retail distribution. But it may be difficult for other independent developers without a goldmine product like Half-Life, to maintain a workable relationship with a major publisher while distributing their games over an online distribution service at lower price points. So it may be that for the foreseeable future, we don't see a major list of games appearing through the likes of Steam or other similar services.

One more place locally that there has been some major development is through the BigPond GameNow service. Here there is an impressive list of PC games available for download as a set of library selections run through a monthly subscription service. GameNow doesn't offer current release titles, running more like a video store release delay compared to cinema release — we're talking about Age of Empires II and Rollercoaster Tycoon 3 as top titles here. It might not keep the hardcore happy, but we do again return to the idea that casual gamers are getting plenty of service through

digital distribution services. They may be on older PCs anyway compared to the demands of current release games, so such a service suits their gaming desires quite well.

Apart from best serving the casual gamers, the majority of digital distribution to date has been all about the PC space. So what is happening on other devices? The mobile phone space is probably the next best serviced direct distribution channel, if not number one. It was an easy fit, with handset games running on Java and Flash engines there was no specialised coding involved. The constraints focus on file size and screen ratio. So far, such games have followed the trend of casual PC games, which is a perfect fit for short bursts of play while on the move. And there may be a lot of buttons available on a handset, but simple control schemes prevail to keep things sweet and simple.

THE REAL DEAL

But what most of us really want to know is when we'll start to see serious game distribution online for the console space, right? Sadly, it doesn't look like it is going to be this generation, not outside the casual game space anyway. The Xbox Live Arcade service has definitely been delivering game content for direct download, but we're not talking about anything that would have needed a DVD or even a CD for storage space. The Wii has its own widely reported intent to offer the Nintendo back catalogue for download, plus Sega Genesis and TurboGrafx 16 may not deliver AAA titles for download, but serious gamers of a certain age will certainly enjoy access to many classic titles.

The biggest players of games available only via download are people who would never consider themselves gamers

So it appears the short-term future of direct distribution is yet to deliver on a grand promise of instant gratification for all the games you want. But with the Arcade service and Wii's back catalogue offerings, what we are seeing right now definitely adds something to our consoles that cannot be underestimated. We all need a break from the big gun games we might focus our playtime on, and smaller games are the perfect antidote to fill a few gaps in the game schedule. Indeed one game, Geometry Wars, has become a very well known title in spite of its humble size, through simple gameplay and a raw addictive quality.

Maybe something really scary is happening. Maybe the hardcore gamer will, through digital distribution to PCs, consoles and mobile devices, be assimilated into the casual gaming mass? Until such time as larger capacity drives and higher bandwidth broadband turn up to make more demanding games easier to access via digital distribution, we can expect to be hit with a mix of casual and classic games over digital distribution, with the odd major title heading to the PC, but with longer wait times between the start of such a download and the access to gameplay.

Where the big titles are starting to provide direct downloads is in additional, expanded and updated content. A kind of extension to the patch system, except in this case we're seeing major updates and expansions. Recently, Oblivion has made some waves with everything from horse barding to game expansions on offer, with small additional fees required to access the new content. Many gamers were upset by the costs associated with minor content updates, but it is clear that this is a big part of the future for major game titles. It can certainly be argued that Oblivion got its pricing wrong, but it is in trailblazer territory. Over the coming months and years, it seems a mix of free and pay content will become common for game titles, in some ways helping developers to add some extra revenue to successful titles beyond purchase price. With all the complaints over increased development costs, this could be a win for everyone as developers capitalise on successful games with expanded content (cheaper than developing an entire sequel on short timeframes) while gamers get to extend the lifespan of a game they have enjoyed. Hopefully this mix of free and pay offerings will strike a nice balance that ensures all but the most bitter of gamers will be happy with what is up for grabs.

The digital distribution revolution has definitely begun. It is now just a question of when, not if, we will see major titles landing on our consoles directly. It seems it won't be this coming generation, but as PC games plus casual and extension content push things forward, there is a good chance we'll see something much more serious happening come the next time around. ◂◂

POPCAP INTERVIEW

PopCap is the big name in casual games. Their digital distribution savvy has taken them to every platform available today — web, PC, Mac, console, mobile phone, PDA, and even in-flight entertainment. We had a chat with James Gwertzman, PopCap's Director of Business development, about their angle on digital distribution.

How important is it to give players a healthy taste for free?

JG: Very important. Many of our customers have never bought a game before — they certainly don't think of themselves as gamers. If it wasn't for the chance to play these games for free, they might never discover them or decide that they must own them to keep playing again. These may be called casual games, but there is nothing casual about how some of our players play our games.

Who is your player base?

PopCap's customer base is quite different from the 'typical' game developers. Of the 6 million+ visitors to PopCap's website each month, 71.8% are female, and fully 75% are over the age of 35. So the 'average' PopCap customer is probably closer to a 40-something housewife looking to relax after a long day rather than a young kid looking to pump some adrenaline.

How big an impact has imitation (from other downloadable game vendors) had in recent years?

We've stopped trying to discuss this topic because there's no way to do it justice in a pithy sound bite. We draw distinctions between games that are "inspired" by other games but are genuinely innovative or trying to bring something new and original to the market versus those games that are just trying to ride directly on the coat tails of another game, not innovating at all but merely changing enough of the art and music to avoid a copyright infringement lawsuit. We admire the first and not the second.

Have new outlets for casual gaming had a big impact for you yet?

We believe mobile will be huge for the casual games genre, and in fact it's already a big source of revenues for PopCap. We've never understood companies trying to make pocket versions of 'big games' since that's simply not the kind of game you want to play when you've got ten minutes to kill on a bus. Casual games, however, are perfect for that 'bite sized' gaming experience.

As for Xbox Live Arcade, we've been happily surprised at how well it's done. Microsoft did an absolutely phenomenal job building the service, and we think it genuinely has the potential to disrupt the entire console space. When a game like Geometry Wars can have a console attach rate of 15% or whatever it is, publishers have to sit up and take notice. Maybe customers actually just want to play fun, creative games?

All this talk of next gen consoles taking games 'to the mainstream'... Do you think ideas like Live Arcade will be crucial to attracting more casual gamers? Who do you think will 'crack the code' of attracting a broad, new player base first — casual games or core AAA titles?

We believe there's room in the market for all sorts of games — hardcore, casual, boy games, girl games, whatever. Next gen consoles need to deliver one sort of experience for their core audience, but they also need to deliver another sort of experience, and deliver it well, to expand the market. And we think Live Arcade is doing a great job with that.

When we look at the games we've sold on Xbox Live Arcade so far, we do ask ourselves who is buying these games? Is it hard-core gamers looking to kill time between Halo 2 matches? Is it achievement badge junkies looking to rack up another badge? Kids trying to justify the console to their moms? We don't know. The one thing I'd say with confidence is that our typical casual game customer is not yet buying the Xbox 360 just for the Live Arcade experience.

What excites you about the downloadable games space today?

I like to say that building a game at the PopCap-level of quality is like building a Faberge egg. You get to put an amazing level of polish and detail into it, and for me personally that's really fun. I used to run a console studio, and it's a lot harder to put that same level of polish into a game that's 100 times larger.

Is the future of ALL games going to be in download-based access and licensing?

There will always be some sort of retail presence. Stores are not going to go away. In fact, if you look at PopCap, we started as a download-only company, and yet the number of copies of our games that we sell in boxes in stores like Walmart has been growing significantly. On the other hand, I do think that eventually all games will be available online, so you can choose whether you want to go to a store and browse or whether you simply want to point and click. I also think that eventually licensing issues will get worked out, so whether you buy a game in a store or buy a game online it's the same thing... so if you buy a game in a store, and then you lose the DVD or whatever, you can recover it online. The license is the thing that you're buying, not the physical medium.

Do you think there will be many download payment models and license options? Per-play, Outright purchase, Time-limited, Level-limited, Ad-driven... what other more creative models are out there?

Sure. It's a very competitive space, and competing around the business model is one way for new companies to differentiate themselves. Also, as this space grows we'll do a better and better job of understanding what customers want (and are willing to pay for!).

Maybe old-fashioned arcade-style pay-for-play is what people want. Like any other forms of mainstream leisure-time entertainment to which consumers devote billions of hours per month, there will always be new competitors and new attempts to monetise that entertainment content.

RED VERSUS BLUE
The Interview

>> Cam Shea

After watching Red Versus Blue it's doubtful you'll ever see Halo the same way again. Forget bloody combat and pitched battles, RvB revealed the truth of life for the soldiers on the ground — the sheer boredom of waiting around for something to happen, and in doing so became one of the most successful machinima series' ever. If you haven't seen it yet, pop on over to http://rvb.roosterteeth.com or pick up the DVDs.

With the ACMI in Melbourne holding a machinima film festival and exhibition (which is on until the 16th of July so get along if you're reading this early enough), we were lucky enough to catch up with one of the driving forces behind the series, Gus Sorola,

HYPER: Tell us a little about drunkgamers.com and how RvB emerged from that.

Gus: Drunkgamers was a website that Geoff (another member of the RvB team) and I started a few years back. Initially we started the website in the hopes of writing alcohol and videogame reviews. We figured that game companies would be obligated to send us free videogames to review so we were hoping to basically get free games for writing drunken ramblings about videogames on the internet. Unfortunately game companies didn't exactly rush to send us free games. Burnie (also from RvB) was in charge of writing about the Xbox for Drunkgamers and since this was shortly after the Xbox came out Burnie of course ended up writing

about Halo quite a bit. After a while Burnie started making Halo gameplay videos to be posted on the website. The videos were pretty dry but the tone of the rest of the site was pretty humorous so one day he decided to try and write a comedic script to go along with the videos he was recording and that was pretty much the genesis of RvB. We just letterboxed out the health information and the gun in the character's hand and we made a trailer as a sort of proof of concept and just went from there.

Were there any other machinima series' in particular that really inspired you to make RvB? How about other sources of inspiration?

When we first started making RvB we were actually unaware that Machinima even existed. We applauded ourselves and thought we were geniuses for inventing a new method of filmmaking. That lasted for about three months until we got contacted by the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences and were informed that we weren't as brilliant as we thought we were. As for sources of inspiration, I think that boredom played a large part in inspiring Red vs Blue. Boredom is what drove us to try and entertain ourselves making the videos, and boredom is also a central theme that the characters in the series have to deal with as well. The whole series starts with a couple of soldiers standing around chatting in an effort to combat boredom and just pass the time until they can go home.

Can you quickly run through the process of actually making an episode?

When we make an episode the first thing we do is of course write a script. Once the script is done we email it to all of the voice actors and then record several takes of them reading through all of their audio using Adobe Audition. Once we have everyone's audio recorded we go through the file and select out the takes we want to use and lay them all down into an audio track in Adobe Premiere. Once the audio is all in place we fire up our Xboxes to start recording video. We use four Xboxes in total; one of the boxes is reserved for the camera man and the other three are used for "actors". We can have up to four characters per box which means that we can have a total of twelve characters on screen at any time. The video output from the director's Xbox is plugged into a capture card in our editing PC and we capture all the video directly into Premiere and then just match up each video segment along with the audio. This process is actually pretty similar to traditional film making since if we don't like the way something looks we just go through another take and attempt to shoot the scene again. Difficult scenes can take up to twenty to thirty takes to get right. Once we finish capturing video and synching it up with the audio we then export the video, encode it into three different formats and upload it to our file server so that people can download it and watch it. From beginning to end a five minute piece of video can take approximately thirty to forty hours of work to complete.

Is RvB's brand of dry, situational humour what comes naturally in terms of writing, or did it come about through the limitations of the Halo engine?

I think the type of humor we use is definitely a by-product of our own personalities. We are all pretty dry boring people so when we write it is just an extension of us. I've seen people use Halo for all types of movies ranging from dramatic pieces to recreations of popular movies so I think that the engine can be well utilized for whatever someone wants to write… we just happen to like dry comedy.

Are engine limitations a good thing in terms of forcing you to be inventive? Or do they drive you mad? Or both?

I think more than anything they are a great thing. Since there are limitations to what we can do it kind of helps to drive the writing. We have to look at the game and at the tools available to us and then just try to write and incorporate
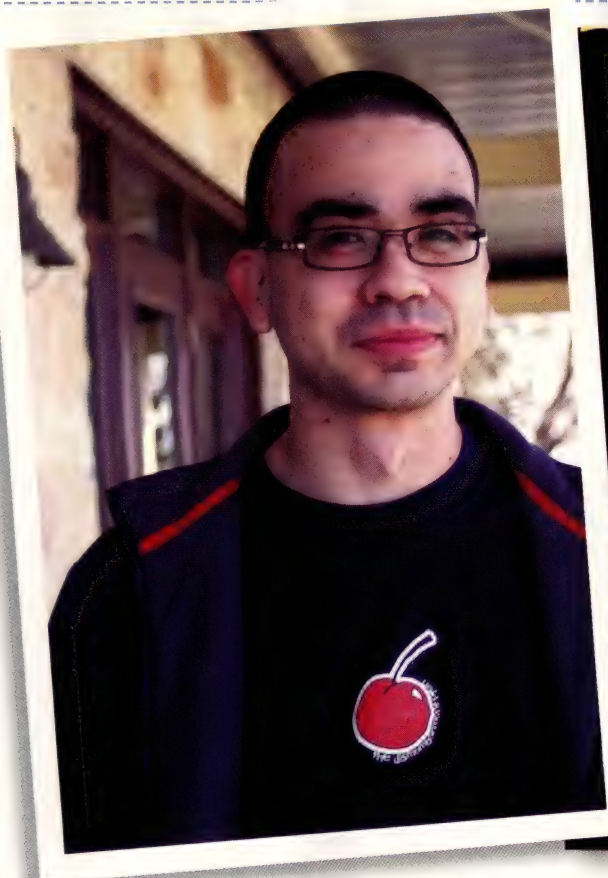
objects from the game into our story. We may launch the game and look around, see a skull and think to ourselves, "Ok, here is a skull. What can we write that is funny about a skull sitting out here in the middle of nowhere?" Obviously the skull is there because it was ripped out of someone's skull and used to beat that same person to death. So the limitations really help focus what we do and are a blessing in disguise.

What's the coolest exploit or bug that you've been able to utilise?

I think that the best bug is probably the one that made Red vs Blue possible in the first place. In the original Halo when a character looks down at their feet for some reason at the last second their head comes back up and looks straight ahead instead of looking down at their feet. So the result is that you have a character on screen who is pointing their gun down in a neutral position but their head is still looking straight ahead as if at someone right in front of them. If it weren't for this bug we would not have been able to make Red vs Blue at all; either that or the series would have been a lot more violent with people pointing guns in the faces of other people they were trying to have a conversation with.

Is the script locked down during audio recording or do your actors have the freedom to ad lib?

The script is actually very much locked down when we start recording, however there are still quite a few ad libs. Most of the time when someone records their audio they will record all the lines in the script like they are written, then they will also go through and record their own ad libs and their own versions of the line that they feel are better. Some characters, like Sarge for example, might have three lines in an episode and then turn in ten minutes of ad libs. As time

has gone on and everyone has become closer to their characters ad libs have started to come a little more easily since we can all more easily identify with our characters and really understand how they would respond in any given situation… wow, now I am starting to sound like a real actor.

How much of the sound effects used are pulled from the game and how many are foley work you've done yourselves?

We pull quite a bit of audio from the game. Most of the weapon firing and explosions are bits of foley work that we recorded in game. When we started we just went around and recorded a library of all the different weapons firing and many different types of explosions that we could

> "A five minute piece of video can take approximately thirty to forty hours of work to complete"

use in the series. That being said however we also do have to do quite a bit of foley work on our own since some sounds that we look for just aren't in the game. For example we once had a character repairing a disabled vehicle and for obvious reasons could not find the sound of a ratchet tightening a bolt anywhere in the game, so we had to go look through our tool box and find a ratchet and record the audio ourselves.

How has the series changed over the years?

When we first started out during the first season the episodes were paced differently and the timing was definitely very slow. As time goes on it seems like our timing is a lot tighter and the pace is much much faster. Of course there are

also more obvious changes like the fact that when Halo 2 came out we switched games and started using Halo 2 to film our episodes.

What other game engines have you experimented with? Is there one other engine in particular that you'd love to use?

We have also made another full series called The Strangerhood using EA's Sims 2 game, and we also had a short five episode series called P.A.N.I.C.S. using the game F.E.A.R. published by Vivendi Universal. Both of those games were PC games so capturing video in those games was slightly different than the process used to make Red vs Blue but it was still overall a very similar process. There are lots of great games out there on the market that we'd like to use to make videos, unfortunately qualities that make a great game don't necessarily translate into qualities that make a game great for making movies. The qualities we look for in a game to make a movie are definitely things that most developers wouldn't think to put in a game simply because they aren't practical; like a freely floating camera for example.

Where do you see Machinima going from here?

As technology improves I see Machinima getting better and better in the coming years. Every iteration of new video card in computers allows for higher visual fidelity in games and helps make videogames look better and better. That coupled with improvements in video codecs which can help make video files smaller size and the proliferation of broadband internet also means that it will be easier to distribute videos and have people watch them. I think as more people watch Machinima and realize that they have the tools to make their own videos that we will really start to see an explosion of homemade fan movies, which is exactly what Red vs Blue is. ≪

The WOW Chronicles
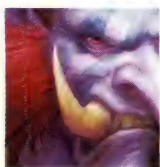
ELBASTARDO

I have been playing World of Warcraft for around two months now. For those of you who don't know the game, you clearly have a life and are excused from reading this column. For those of you who are aware, or are curious, I'd like to introduce you to this, the first of a monthly instalment detailing the devastation of my personal life, my shunning the sun and fleshly human contact. All because of my depraved lust for WoW.

POST-TOLKIEN

This simple MMORPG takes place in the world of Azeroth, the setting for the popular RTS games. Exceptionally well-made, it's a classical post-Tolkien world, slowly advancing technologically. Yep. Dwarves with guns.

The two opposing factions are the Alliance; the shiny elves, gruff dwarves, colourless humans and deeply psychopathic gnomes, who oppose the Horde. Orcs, Undead, Trolls and for some reason, ridiculous cow-men Tauren. The Horde are basically the bad guys, Alliance the goodies. Naturally, I chose the bad guys.

Online games are not the kind of place a man chooses to look for the deep ironies of life but sometimes that's what you find. A Player Versus Player server as an Undead Warrior was great, for a while. Until I discovered that Alliance players are treacherous bullies. The amount of times I was killed (or ganked, to use the parlance), by gangs of Alliance at levels so high the game wouldn't even tell me how badly I was outclassed, was ridiculous. To be camped out by a holy priest, who then spits on your body, screaming GOTH at my poor, beloved Undead, is an example not only

of frustration but also of role-playing madness. Those are the good guys? This happened not once but dozens of times in my life as a Hordey. It was boring, stupid, mean and irritating. The only thing that I could think of was to not beat them, rather join them.

That's right. I started a new character. Alliance. I tried a Gnome Warlock. Gnomes are tiny, the smallest playable race. Easy to overlook. Warlocks summon big, frig-off demons as slaves. Hah! Now I felt like a big man. More of the irony…

Warlocks, however, are subtly misnamed. They should be called something along the lines of Kurt Cobains. They die more easily than your average gamer's chance of seeing a boob in person. While I did get a vicarious and probably very sick thrill out of summoning demons and draining the life force out of pigs and dogs, I still died an awful lot against anything more robust than a leper. Quite literally, Leper Gnomes, two foot of rotting fury, were a bit tough for me.

Then I remembered something. Something magical. During a PVP battle, I had been driven to madness by a specific character class: Paladins. Supposedly champions of God and decency, Paladins in play are actually loathsome cowards. They have forcefields, healing and yet can still pack a punch. More than once I'd fought a Paladin only to have that damn bubble appear, have them heal themselves fully, all the while invulnerable, then start the fight again, fresh as a daisy. In more of that irony, I realised that was what I wanted to be. A total coward, bully and yellow chicken capable of ruining people's fun, without being accountable. I chose a human because, frankly, Elves were a little fruity and I couldn't handle the lame Scots accents of the Dwarves and gnomes are, well, they're two foot high and sound like midgets on helium.
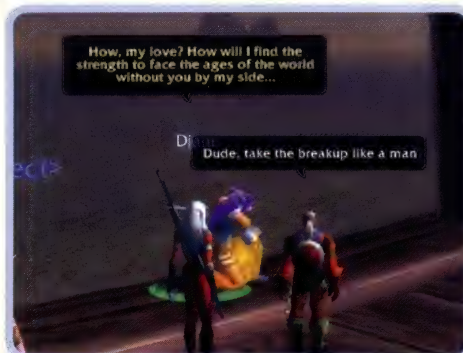
Now, at level 20, I feel I've finally found my World of Warcraft class. Yes!

I've powered my way through the lower level quests, which involve mutilating retarded kobolds and stealing from them. I've killed incompetent bands of thieves who have brilliant plans like "let us occupy a pumpkin patch" and have even fought radioactive Troglodites in a quarry. In the following months, I'm going to share with you my ongoing quest to rise to the dizzying heights of the maximum level, sixty. And how I'm doing it through cowardice, bribery and low cunning.

Next Month – *Thelsamar to Darkshore. Cowardice, giant trees, gianter demon-gods and whinging stories of true love.*

How, my love? How will I find the strength to face the ages of the world without you by my side…

Dude, take the breakup like a man

Sorry for unleashing Troggs on the town, guys

The Brooding Paladin - *Elbastardo, 2006*

HYPER GAME RETAILER LISTING

STORE NAME	LOCATION	PLATFORMS SOLD
Berlin Wall Software Supermarket www.berlinwall.com.au	408 King William St, Adelaide SA. Ph: 08 8231 4799	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, Gameboy, GBA, Mac,
bGamer www.bgamer.com.au	Online Retailer	PS2, PSP, MP3 Players
City Software www.citysoftware.com.au	3/222 Latrobe St, Melbourne VIC PH: 03 9250 6900; Shop 7 & 8, 111 Pacific Hwy. North Sydney NSW 2060	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA
Devoted DVD www.devoted.com.au	Shop 5, Rovergom Village, South Marrang VIC. Ph: 03 9436 4566	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA
Dick Smith Electronics / Dick Smith Powerhouse www.dse.com.au	http://dse.findnearest.com.au/	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, Gameboy, GBA.
DVD Crave www.dvdcrave.com.au	Shop 1/471 Payneham Road, Felixstow SA. Ph: 08 8365 5231	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA,
EB Games no website	Please go to your nearest EB Games store	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA
GameFuse www.gamefuse.com.au	Online Retailer - PH: 03 9681 8189	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA, Mac,
Game Traders www.gametraders.com.au	Please go to your nearest Game Traders store	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA,
Gamehead www.gamehead.com.au	Online Retailer Ph: 1800 008 525	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, Gameboy, GBA,
Games Warehouse www.gameswarehouse.com.au	Online Retailer Ph: 02 9648 5656	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA, Mac,
Games Wizards www.gameswizards.com	22 Stores located in NSW, VIC & ACT. Ph 1300 131 670 for your nearest store.	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA, Mac
Gamesnet www.gamesnet.com.au	Online Store Ph: (03) 5256-3530	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA
Gamezoo www.gamezoo.com.au	Online Retailer	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA,
Portable Zone www.portablezone.com.au	Online Retailer	PSP, memory sticks
Quantronics www.quantronics.com.au	Shop 14 / 2 O'Connell St, Parramatta NSW. Ph: (02) 9635 5554	PSP, Xbox360, peripherals
Replay Games www.replaygames.com.au	Online Retailer	PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA,
Software Supermarket www.softwaresu.com.au	248 Franklin Street Adelaide SA. Ph: 08 8410 3111	PC, PS2, Xbox, PSP
Techbuy www.techbuy.com.au	Online Retailer Ph: 029-648-1818	PC, PS2, Xbox360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA,
The Gamesmen www.gamesmen.com.au	Penshurst 02 9580 9888; Penrith 02 4721 7411; Wollongong 02 4225 2424	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, Gameboy, GBA,
True Gamer www.truegamer.com.au	Online Retailer	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA.

RETAILER PROFILE

(Gw) Gameswizards

Over a period of more than 16 years, Gameswizards have developed a reputation as one of Australia's leading retailers of computer software, hardware and video gaming products. Established in January 1990, Gameswizards have unsurpassed experience as specialists in the computer gaming industry.

Gameswizards have twenty-two stores located throughout Sydney, Canberra, Newcastle, the NSW Central Coast and country Victoria. Each of our stores carries one of the largest selections of entertainment software anywhere in Australia. It is our combination of experienced and knowledgeable sales staff coupled with competitive prices and a huge range of stock that have made Gameswizards the best choice for your computer software, hardware and video gaming needs.

Every Gameswizards outlet features a complete catalogue of software and accessories for all major platforms including: PC CD-ROM, Sony PSP®, Xbox® 360, PlayStation®2, Xbox®, GameCube™, Nintendo DS™ and Nintendo Game Boy™ Advance™.

We also stock a comprehensive range of console hardware for Sony PSP®, Xbox® 360, PlayStation®2, Xbox®, GameCube™, Nintendo DS™ and Nintendo Game Boy™ Advance™.

Gameswizards.com was launched in December 1996 and was designed to be informative and functional. Gameswizards.com aims to provide our new and existing customers with an online presence 24 hours a day, 7 days a week that is accessible from every corner of the globe.

JOYTECH NITRO RACING WHEEL

XBOX 360 / RRP: $149.95 / WWW.JOYTECH.NET

>> Love the insanely realistic visuals of Project Gotham Racing 3 but need more realism when it comes to handling? Love drifting in Ridge Racer 6 more than life itself but want to have the tactile sensation of throwing your car around a corner then steering against the drift? Then maybe you need a racing wheel for your 360.

It's a particular type of enthusiast gamer that shells out for a console steering wheel; the sort of person who is prepared to put in lap after lap looking for that perfect combination of racing line and speed management, all to shave half a second off their best time, or to be able to go up against top competition online. There are a few wheels on the market, and this month we've spent some time with Joytech's Nitro Racing Wheel for Xbox 360 and have come away quite impressed.

Most importantly the construction is solid, with a good sense of weight to the wheel, grippy rubber finish and responsive movement. The LCD panel on the face lets you adjust sensitivity settings, plus there are custom settings for Ridge Racer 6 and Need For Speed: Most Wanted. Like most wheels it can be a little awkward getting to all the buttons, but with two sets of paddles underneath on each side, plus an up/down gear shift (on the wrong side unfortunately) you shouldn't have too much of a problem. Also like most wheels the Nitro comes with leg supports so you can sit on a couch and not have the wheel move too much. Of course, a more upright chair — or using the suction cups to mount it on a table - still works best, especially to comfortably reach the pedals. Unfortunately the wheel isn't wireless, so you'll still have to tuck cables away so they don't get in the way of the pedals. On the upside, you can plug your headset straight into the wheel.

All in all the Nitro Racing Wheel is definitely worth a look for 360 racing freaks — it feels great to use and within a few laps you won't look back.

THE JOYTECH NITRO TRI-FORCE

If you're after a racing wheel for PC, PS2 or Xbox, you can get all three in one in the form of the Nitro Tri-Force. Not just an awesome name, this wheel is very similar to the Nitro for 360, and comes with adaptors for each system, as well as a clamp that slots in where the leg supports also go, allowing you to clamp it to a table. All our thoughts on the 360 wheel stand for this one too, so if you're after a wheel, check it out. The Nitro Tri-Force retails for $149.95.
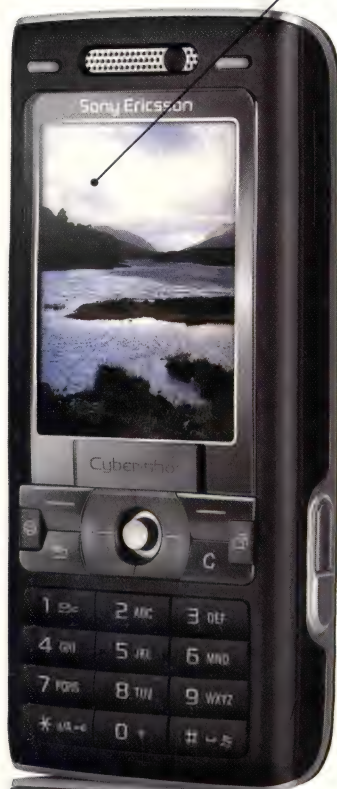
SONY ERICSSON K800I

RRP: TBA / WWW.SONYERICSSON.COM

>> Every month someone seems to release a phone that makes all others look like junk by comparison, and this month the award goes to Sony Ericsson. The K800i is, simply put, a truly great phone. At the top of the list is its integrated 3.2 megapixel Cybershot camera. Yes, it's a high number, but more importantly, the photos turn out great. With Xenon flash, autofocus, an intuitive interface and "BestPic" (allowing you to take up to 9 full res pics in rapid succession), the K800i is a shoe in if you want rock solid digital camera functionality in your phone. Just pull down the lens cover and you're ready to go.

Of course it's no slouch in terms of other functionality with Bluetooth 2.0, USB 2.0 support, Memory Stick Micro expansion, mp3 player, stereo FM radio built in and photo blogging capabilities to boot (no really). Factor in nice aesthetics and a huge 240x320 pixel 262K screen, and this is currently the 3G phone to beat.

Review Index

Reviews >>

Game Theory
SEAMUS BYRNE

Powerful peripherals and gesture gameplay

Guitar Hero has entered the local market, rounding out the amazing set of fancy peripheral games on the market now for PS2. Come the next next gen, could we expect to see standard controller schemes on consoles become the exception rather than the rule?

It wasn't long ago that the best you could do was a gun game here and there. Now we have DDR, Eyetoy, Singstar, Buzz... all of which are often seen as the domain of kids or, generally, non-gamers. For gamers, they're a fun diversion, but not the main event.

Guitar Hero is a special example, and sheds some light on what these games really offer the market. With gameplay far more welcoming to avid gamers (we all love to rock out) we find something that is both simple and complex, giving it an addictive nature that is now missing from many more 'serious' games. Simple and complex? In the casual, moment to moment context, there are few rules and a simple concept that drives the fun. For those who take up the larger challenge, there is a deep complexity involved with mastery of such games.

If you were to chart the learning curve on these kinds of games, it's a very comfortable incline. Drop a fun factor on that chart and it starts high and only gets higher (though there may be a third frustration factor for those pushing hard toward mastery). When many standard controller console games try to ease the learning curve, you get a trough of boring gameplay before you get to the good stuff, which turns a lot of players off — certainly the casuals.

With the arrival of the Wii and its magic wand, we will now have a console that effectively has a highly evolved version of a special peripheral as its core controller. Intuitive, gesture based controls at their best will follow the above model of fast access to fun gameplay with comfortable learning curves and new kinds of skilled play. Standard control schemes will still be available too.

I think we're in for a fascinating ride with the Wii. We're hearing a lot of developers making an effort to use the new control scheme. EA sports franchises making the effort should certainly make others take notice and do the same. Will anyone really miss the standard control options if we rarely see them on this console? Is there any doubt Sony were 'inspired' by Nintendo for their PS3 controller and that Microsoft will be watching very closely for future control schemes and peripheral development?

If the Wii steps up and takes a surprise lead in the great grab for mainstream gamers, it could also change the wider perception of gaming. Even if you are not playing these games, they outwardly look more socially acceptable. Gone is the subtle fast twitch that seems so sinister to outsiders, replaced by larger, more obvious activity that could dispel the classic "go out and get some exercise" concerns.

It may also become more obvious to ourselves when we have been playing a bit too long, as muscle lethargy and tiredness impact more directly on our ability to play. I'm sure many gamers will feel such change could ruin their weekend gaming marathons. But on the whole, this can only be a good thing for the acceptance of gaming as a hobby — or even as a sport.

More complex control schemes may recede from the console environment and head back to the desktop, which is where such schemes are at their best anyway. If consoles are to maintain a course toward dominance in the living room, there is a good chance gesture controllers will play a big role — thankfully, gamers won't have to lose out in the process. There will be many new territories to explore.

THE HYPER SCORING SYSTEM - What's it all about in a roundabout way?

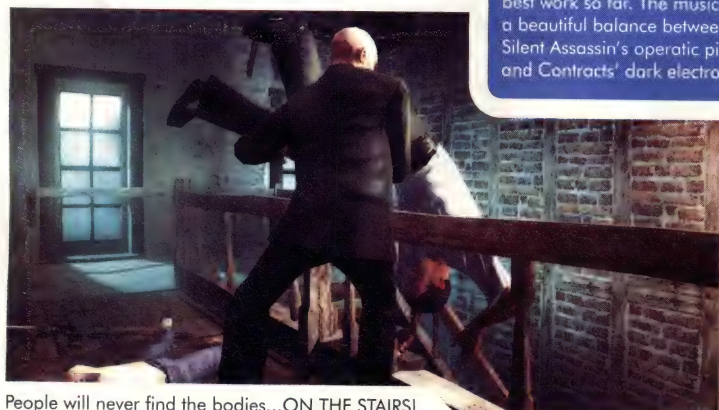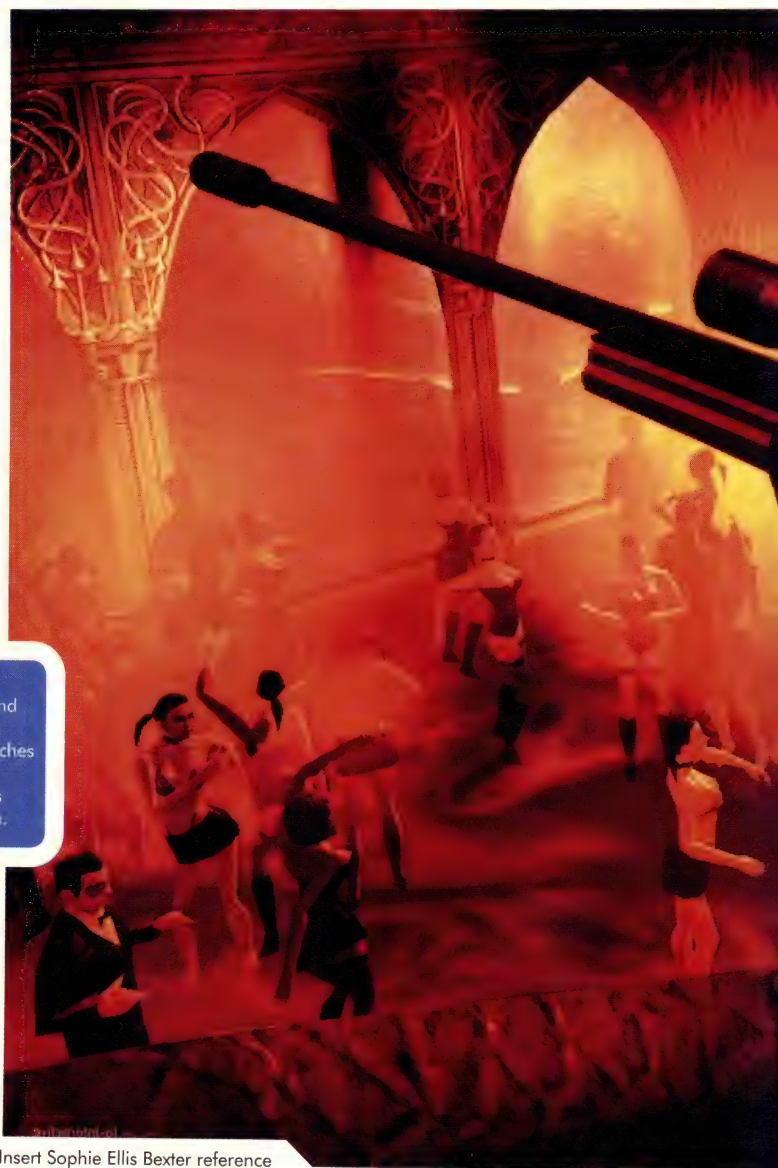| 0-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90+
These games are the progeny of the dark lord. Gamer beware	Tears of rage and confusion well up when playing these games	Games in the sixties are like hippies - smelly but harmless	Bad haircuts and lurid clothes are the hallmark of these games	Play these games and you'll turn that frown upside down!	Sunshine, lollipops and rainbows, ya gotta love these

Caption: People will never find the bodies...ON THE STAIRS!

> !!! Jesper Kyd returns to score Blood Money, and he's done some of his best work so far. The music reaches a beautiful balance between Silent Assassin's operatic pieces and Contracts' dark electronica.

Caption: Insert Sophie Ellis Bexter reference

Hitman: Blood Money

ALEXANDER GAMBOTTO-BURKE is too long a name for a decent intro

≫ I don't want to be bald. My wife alleges that my widow's peak grows peakier by the hour, but I refuse to give up. Call it vanity if you must; I prefer to think of it as self-preservation. (Denial is a wonderful thing, readers.) That said, if my blond mop does one day devolve into chrome dome, at least I'll have Agent 47 to look up to when I'm feeling - well, hairless.

INITIALLY DISTURBING

Okay, that may sound a little creepy to you, what with me identifying with an amoral killer and all, but you haven't been playing Hitman: Blood Money for a week straight.

Caption: [up] Not really incognito

The concept of killing people for money is initially disturbing, but after pulverising your way through IO Interactive's latest offering, it comes to seem as anodyne as scrubbing coffee stains off the carpet. That stain isn't going to get any lighter, so you might as well scrub the bastard out with a sponge and some bleach. Same deal with silenced pistols, I guess.

Which brings us to the one problem I have with the game: the black and white moral absolutism. (Or coffee and bleach, if you're in ecstasy over my analogy.) For fans of immersive gaming storylines, it's a letdown that, after IO made 47 feel a little queasy about wasting complete strangers, he's gone back to being pretty blasé about the whole thing. Which isn't to say that Blood Money's story is bad, but that it focuses more on 47's job and the fate of the International Contract Agency (his employers) than the man himself. This is disappointing, since the Hitman games have always tried to touch on 47's inner life.

Still, if you're into analysis — and you want me to get on talking about the gameplay — you could say 47's indifferent mien reflects how he sees his hits: ordered, but open puzzles with basic goals (get in, observe NPC patterns, et cetera) and a definitive outcome - kill the bad guy. In these days of GTA and Oblivion, where games are striving for more complexity and less abstraction, this may sound a little oid 5kooi. But it's something IO's been refining since Hitman, and with Blood Money, they've reached near-perfection.

Remember how in Silent Assassin there were those missions where it was almost impossible not to whip out your dual-SMGs and go on a murderous rampage, despite the fact that it was ostensibly a game about stealth? Cry no more, for in Blood Money, it's actually possible — and not overwhelmingly difficult — to finish each mission without

Caption: [up] Is that Crazy Legs in the background?

Caption: [up] Enough silicon to stop a bullet?

firing a single shot or killing an innocent NPC. It takes longer, but it's rewarding. Take the Opera level — spoilers, blah, blah, blah — where you've been sent to kill a pedophile, who doubles as a tenor, and the boss of a prostitution ring, who's also the American ambassador to the Vatican. During the tenor's performance, he faces up to a fake WWI pistol. If you're sneaky, you can swap that fake pistol for a real one, and rather than his death looking like a hit, it's a terrible accident. If you want to get a bit

more explosive, you could always trigger a mine, causing a giant chandelier to fall — nice time to go in and scrub that coffee stain.

Same goes for his buddy — when pimpy stands up to congratulate Uncle Disgusting, you can sneak up and shove him from the balcony. If no one sees you, it'll look like the ambassador had one Slippery Nipple too many. And even if you don't take advantage of each level's specific features, you've got some nifty tools to help you kill without bullets — ever-reliable fiber-wire, a sedative syringe, and a poison syringe. The latter is especially useful; not only can you use it to taint your target's food, but, if push comes to prick, you can stick in their neck.

MORE RATIONAL

Blood Money's AI helps all this along. Guards will no longer decorate you with lead for minor transgressions, like bumping into them. They also don't spontaneously realise you're a threat when they've only seen you for ten seconds. Overall, the game's AI is much more rational when you're being sneaky. You may be unhappy to hear that NPC routines remain

largely scripted, but to be frank, the game would be almost impossible if they weren't. The biggest challenge you'll face in Blood Money is working out what NPCs do throughout the day (or night), and thus how you can steal that outfit, break into that room, or strangle that baddie without ending up as human caviar. It's a puzzle, basically, but rewarding and — for the first time in the series — logical. If you do it right, you'll win. End of story.

When you do win, you'll have one last obstacle: notoriety. Being the most conspicuous hitman in history, it's in 47's interest to not let on that his new HDTV was funded by killing a Cuban drug lord. You'll be doing your darnedest to avoid video cameras — or removing the incriminating tapes — and making sure anyone who saw you doing hitman-y stuff is bribed or scrubbed. It's a great system, since the more well-known you become, the more suspicious guards are. An end-of-mission newspaper dishes your hit's details, and you do get

a gooey feeling when it's reported that, "No one knows anything about the killer since no one saw him/her." It's a creative way of IO saying, "Job well done, sexy man!"

The other gift you'll get from IO is Blood Money's visuals. Nice bloom effects, advanced normal mapping, and crafty level design make this game a pretty one... at least on some systems. We reviewed it on PC but also played it on PS2 and it looks a whole lot clunkier. No surprise there really.

Simply put, Blood Money is the best game in the series. It's not a revolution, but it virtually perfects the game mechanics IO established in 47's first outing. Snazzy graphics, sensible AI, air-tight gameplay, and a gripping story all make this the perfect game for when you're up for a bit of carpet cleaning. Or when you've started considering Rogaine. <<

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: "Sensible" AI, notoriety, easy non-violence.

MINUS: Female character models, needs a morality system.
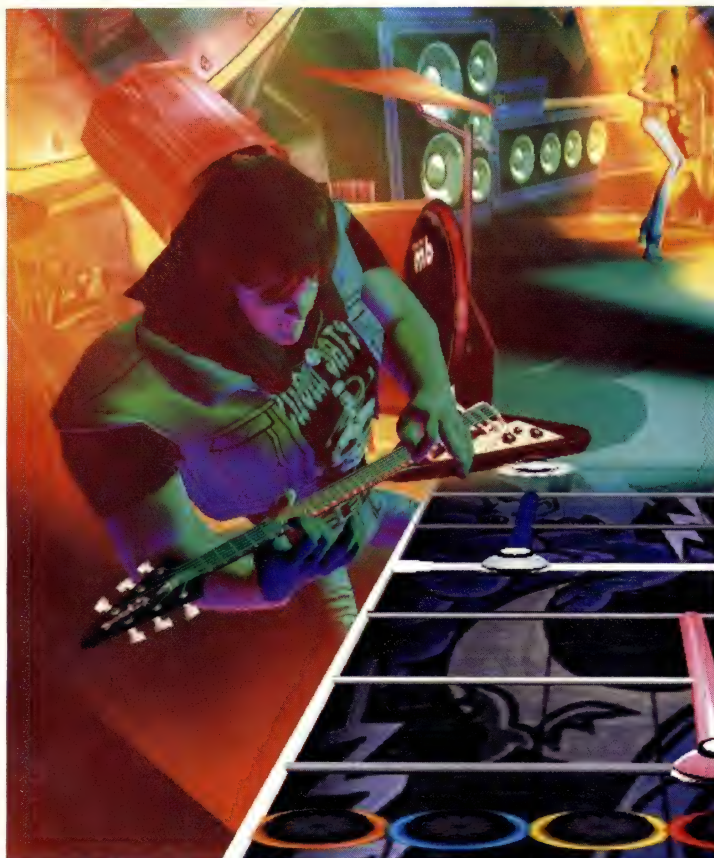
VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
87	96	89

OVERALL

90

HYPER BiG RUBBER STAMP OF APPROVAL

Come on, IO, you've almost perfected it. Don't stop now!
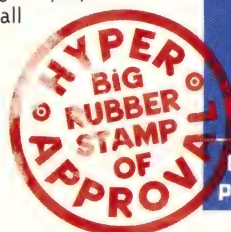
He still looks less insane than Angus Young...

Guitar Hero

DANIEL WILKS is a Killer Queen

!!! PCPP's own Hottie Funbags, Darren Wells has turned out to be something of a rock god. Who would have guessed?

There's an old, rather disgusting (if you're prudish) phrase about truly going wild on the guitar; to "rock out with your cock out". This came frighteningly close to reality in the office when, on the second, entirely non-productive day of having Guitar Hero, Dan Staines began to thrust his groin rhythmically, suggestively (perhaps sexily) at anyone who dared challenge him in multiplayer. His crotch gymnastics were truly a thing of beauty and terror, resulting in me taking the worst rocking of my

[up] Bah, this is not rock...

life. I was rocked to the head and shoulders, and maybe a little to the bathing suit area. Luckily the I'm Taking A Sicky So I Can Have A Four Day ANZAC Long Weekend allowed me enough time to rest and recuperate for a rematch. I was rocked again but I will be back, oh yes, I will be back.

THE PATHETIC VERGE

A grown man playing with a small plastic guitar may sound on the verge of pathetic but you shouldn't knock it until you've tried it. The guitar peripheral (necessary to play the game) may look goofy but after a session or two it will become an integral part of your gaming setup. The guitar comes with five fret keys, a strum bar and a whammy bar. Gameplay comes down to holding down the right fret key to match the note scrolling down the screen and hitting the strum bar at the right time, occasionally using the whammy bar on long held notes to build up star power which can

be used to double your points for a small amount of time. It may sound simple and at the easiest level of difficulty it is, using only three of the fret buttons. It's a good introduction to the gameplay but nothing compared to the difficulty and fun of medium, hard and the appropriately named extreme.

Medium difficulty, the first level at which you can start earning money to buy new guitars (though why you would buy anything aside from the entirely rocking Gibson double guitar is beyond me) introduces a fourth fret button into play, more frequent fret changes and a lot of power chords (holding down two frets at once). It's hard but after a few tries you'll find yourself rocking out with the best of them. Hard uses all five frets making it a nightmare to

...this is ROCK!
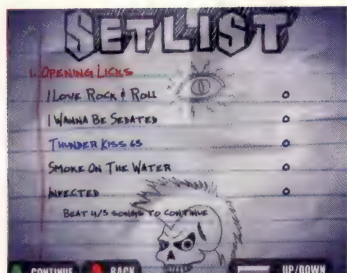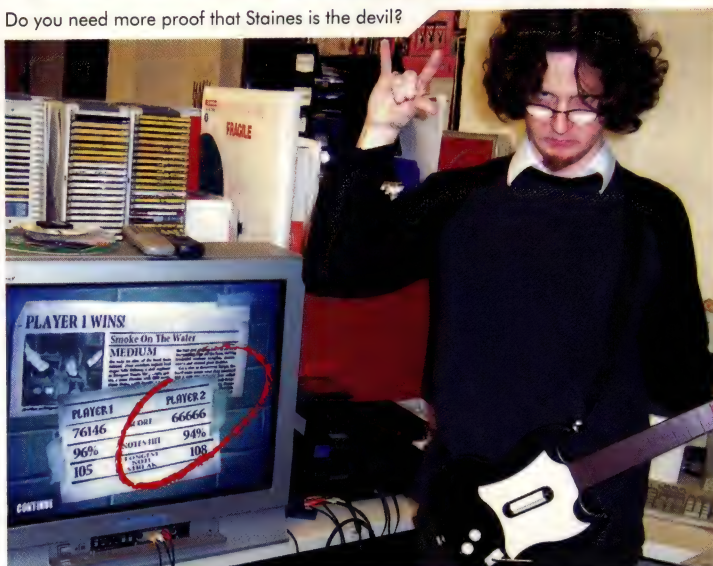
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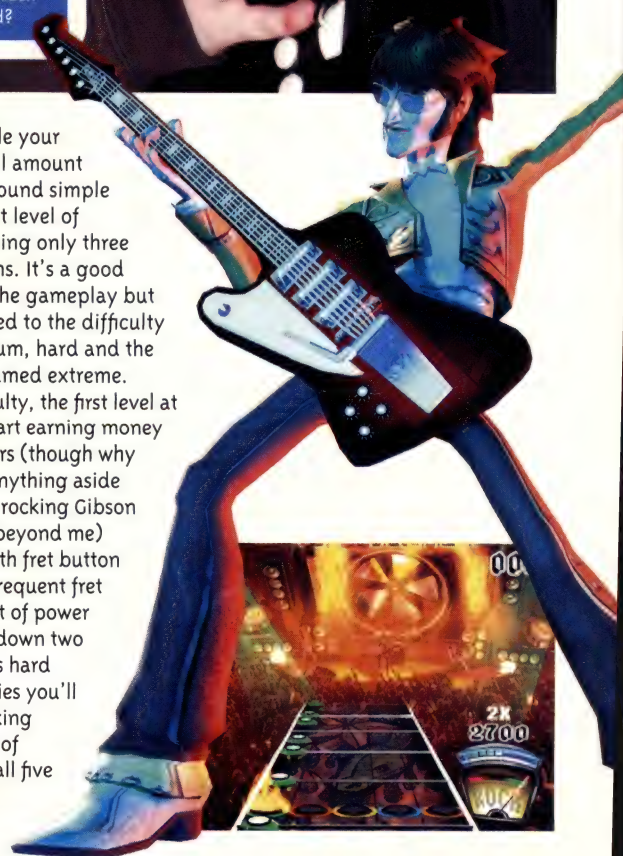
Do you need more proof that Staines is the devil?

SETLIST

OPENING LICKS

I Love Rock & Roll
I Wanna Be Sedated
Thunder Kiss 65
Smoke On The Water
Infected
Beat 4/5 Sound to Continue

CONTINUE   BACK   UP/DOWN

The Daily Dose

Thunder Kiss 65   MEDIUM
Full-scale riot breaks out in
area neighborhood

REVIEW   SCORE
★★★★★   125 304

515 Note Streak!   100% NOTES HIT

PLAYER 1 WINS!
Smoke On The Water
MEDIUM

PLAYER 1   PLAYER 2
76146   SCORE   66666
96%   NOTES HIT   94%
105   LONGEST NOTE STREAK   108

CONTINUE

play (though hilarious to watch) if you don't have very nimble fingers. Extreme is just painful, using all five buttons, a hell of a lot of note changes and more power chords than could possibly be healthy.

Although single player is great fun, the real joy in the game comes from rocking out with a friend in multiplayer, trying to score more perfect notes and a higher point score. Instead of simply playing the same notes, the screen is split down the middle with each side having different scrolling notes that combine to make the tune. More so than in single player, multiplayer almost requires you to take a rock pose and maybe do a little bit of rhythmic thrusting.

The track selection is eclectic but contains a lot of tracks that are fun to play. The simple chord progressions of I Love Rock and Roll (the Joan Jett version, not the execrable Brittany Spears version)

EXTREME IS JUST PAINFUL, USING ALL FIVE BUTTONS AND A HELL OF A LOT OF NOTE CHANGES

or I Wanna Be Sedated are great for getting a grip on gameplay whereas Queen's Killer Queen has some really interesting note progressions and timing. The tracks range from classic rock tracks like Ziggy Stardust and Smoke on the Water through to some interesting bluesy tracks like Cream's Crossroads or more modern fare like Take Me Out by Franz Ferdinand or No One Knows by QOTSA. The tracks seem to be a mix of actual recordings and covers, some of which are really shocking (Killer Queen and Take Me Out especially) but the quality of some of the tracks does not in any way detract from the fun of the game; quite the opposite, the crappy covers just make you feel like you're rocking out to a tribute band.

CHOP CHOP FREESTYLE?

If there is one flaw with Guitar Hero it would be that the game in no way rewards experimentation. A game called Guitar Hero should allow players to go crazy with the guitar solo or add a few extra notes to liven up a performance (as was allowed in the Parappa games) but sadly this is not the case. Accuracy is the name of the game; if you don't hit the right note at the right time or you happen to add in a little extra strum between notes your combo bonus drops and your level of rocking will decline. Actually, come to think of it there are two flaws with the game — tracks need to be unlocked in single player to be playable in multiplayer and the bonus tracks you can unlock by playing through the medium difficulty and above career modes, to put it politely, suck balls. Even so, Guitar Hero is up there as one of the greatest rhythm games ever released. <<

>> **GUITAR HERO 2** - Hot on the tail of Guitar Hero is Guitar Hero 2, currently in development by Red Octane. Aside from the rocking contained within the original game, Guitar Hero 2 promises to contain around 55 new tracks and a whole new spin on multiplayer that will see players choosing whether they are playing lead, rhythm or bass before the match to create a whole song. We can't wait.

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Rocking, power chords, crotch thrusting.

MINUS: Crotch thrusting, steep price, unlocking system.
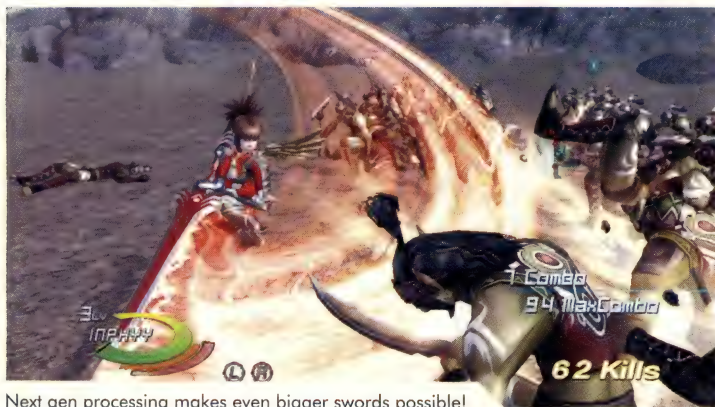
VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
78	92	91

OVERALL

90

HYPER BIG RUBBER STAMP OF APPROVAL

Power chord, thrust, rock pose, devil sign.

Next gen processing makes even bigger swords possible!

!!! The enemy armies in N3 can pose a real challenge, but the army you bring into each mission as support is completely inept. Most of the time they stand around waiting for directions, and when they are directed they move like slugs.
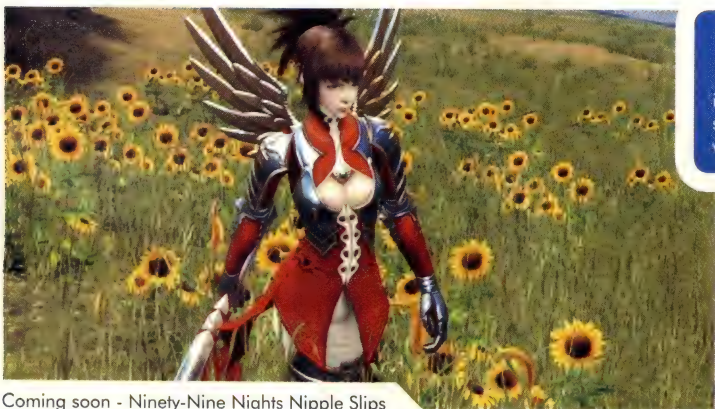
Coming soon - Ninety-Nine Nights Nipple Slips

Ninety-Nine Nights (IMPORT REVIEW)

JONATHAN IKEDA sharpens his swords.

Ninety-Nine Nights in prototype form was one of the first titles shown by Microsoft to demonstrate the considerable power of Xbox 360. Happily, the final game delivers on what the mock-up and tech demo versions promised: battles with hundreds of characters on-screen simultaneously and an idea of something epic.

N3 is a distinctly 'next-gen' kind of game. Not only are there countless soldiers and monsters visible at any given time, but there are rich textures and spectacular weapon effects which look so lovely they'll make your eyes smile. Technically

The greener grass over the next gen fence

speaking, N3 really could not have been done on any previous console. There are occasions later on when slowdown creeps into play, but most of the time Ninety-Nine Nights is a beautiful game.

Camera control is assigned to the right analogue stick and provides an immediate way of getting the best view of what N3 has to offer, successfully finding the middle ground between prettiness and practicality. N3's audio is also lovingly presented. As you'd expect from any game with 'Rez man' Mizuguchi-san at the helm, Ninety-Nine Nights pumps out sound of the highest quality. In a 5.1 surround environment, particularly, the field of enemies comes to life while a circling score of orchestral music brings some additional drama to N3's hectic missions.

OLD SKOOL/NEW SKOOL
For all its next-gen eye candy, N3 is a surprisingly old skool type of
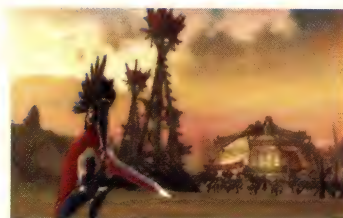
[up] Damn that's pretty

game. You control your character with the left analogue stick for 360-degree movement in the battlefield, using the face buttons to jump, attack and perform special moves. The R trigger effects a dash which helps you to cut through enemy armies like you were mowing the lawn. Combinations of jumps, attacks and movements can be used to perform elaborate combos. There's a tutorial outside of the main game which lists all of the available combos for your characters, so learning new moves is simply a question of memory.

Special attacks form the core of N3's gameplay method. For every kill you make, an orb of red

[up] BEEFCAKE!

magic is collected and added to a magic meter. When the meter hits its limit you can tap B to initiate a phenomenal character-specific move. The premise for these moves is that the action cuts to a slo-mo blur while your character's speed is increased. This state only lasts for around 15 seconds - during that window you burst from one point to another, guided by the analogue stick, and cause as much damage as possible. And beyond that, for every kill made during a special there's a blue magic orb added to a second meter. When that one tops out you can perform a super special. In either case, four-figure hit combos are possible. Clearly the developer

41 Combo
150 MaxCombo
102 Kills

Max Combo - now there's an awesome pseudonym

put a lot of work into making this feature enjoyable and spectacular; and it succeeds on both counts.

Weapons and level-ups are featured in a similarly pleasing way. There's no need to worry about upgrades or improvements, because both things happen automatically as you make your way through the game. Characters stop increasing in strength once they reach Level 9, but by that stage they're pretty well armed and very dangerous. Special attacks increase in awesomeness right up to Level 9, as well, by which time they are truly awesomely awesome. Oh yes.

WASTED NIGHTS

The format of N3's adventure is slightly more complicated than its gameplay. Initially you're presented with just one playable character, Inphyy, whose own story begins in a countryside castle and takes her through fields, villages and forests. She leads an army into missions which spread across a Hyrule-esque map, and along the way she encounters the first of N3's six other playable characters. Each of these seven cast members has a unique adventure in a separate scenario,

N3 FLITS FROM SUPER-EASY TO SUPER-HARD AND BACK AGAIN IN SPITE OF YOUR PROGRESS

although later on in the game there are occasions when characters' stories overlap to knit everything together. It's a clever system which ensures that the game has breadth as well as length. But, sadly, it's a system which has not been fine-tuned.

Part of the problem with Ninety-Nine Nights is that - although it looks and sounds the part - its gameplay is unbalanced and sometimes glitchy. The game's difficulty level seems to have been randomised; the result is a spread of easy and difficult missions which doesn't follow any set pattern. Where games of this type usually become more difficult as you progress through them, N3 bizarrely flits from super-easy to super-hard and back again in spite of your progress. And there's no manual override: selectable difficulty levels are conspicuously missing. The game isn't completely wrecked by these inconsistencies, but what should have been a solidly progressive title is instead

an erratic collection of stages.

N3's problems with glitches and bugs are less forgivable. There are times when collision detection is poorly implemented, leaving you with a huge sword to fight against a boss who can't actually be hit without resorting to extreme tactics. There are invisible walls, too, which scupper the game's initial sense of freedom. And then there's N3's hilariously poor A.I. which provides you with a supporting army of virtually useless dimwit troops.

Hitting things with swords is fun, no doubt. And logically, hitting lots of things with really big swords is even more enjoyable. Ninety-Nine Nights spends a lot of its time proving that, as of now, Xbox 360 can give sword fetishists the biggest carnage for their dollars. But then it undoes a lot of its fine work with these silly glitches and gameplay-related oversights. Unfortunately, N3's faults win out. It's fun for quite a while, but eventually this ambitious game becomes frustrating. <<

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Stunning to watch, awesome specials and combos, sounds fine.

MINUS: Dodgy A.I., visual glitches, gameplay balance is off, shortish.

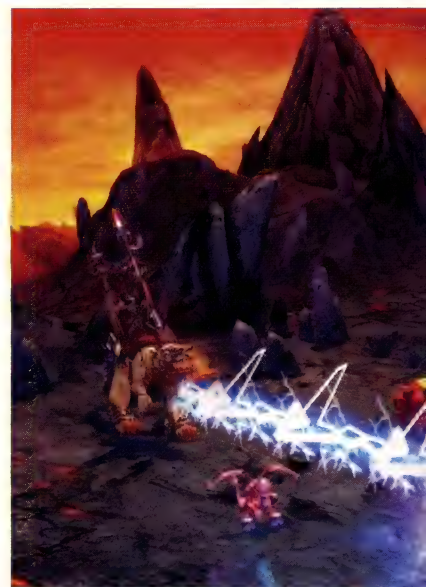| VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
90	85	65

OVERALL

70

An almost, but not quite next gen spectacle.

Check out the Heroes of Might & Magic mini-game at www.heroesmini.com!

Attacking under cover of glare, always a smart move

Heroes of Might & Magic V

ELIOT FISH loses track of space and time. Again.

>> We can just see the box art for this game looking like some kind of fantasy washing detergent. New and improved! Now with added demons! In 3D! Smells fresh! Yes, Heroes of Might & Magic is back, but it's had a visual overhaul and a bit of a gameplay tweak. Warm wash and do not tumble dry.

ONE GOOD TURN

With Ubisoft now at the helm and Nival Interactive in the engine room (yes, fresh from cloning Heroes with their Etherlords games), this is a rebirth for the series that
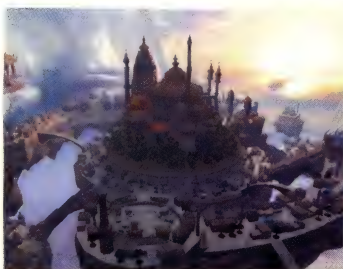
means more than just the addition of a 3D accelerator to the system requirements. Nival Interactive has revamped the whole Heroes of Might & Magic universe, trimming the fat from its bloated lore, and steering the story into safer waters. A fresh start is a good thing, but the most important thing is that the core gameplay hasn't been spoiled. This is still classic Heroes gameplay, but with added zing.

The Heroes series has always been about turn-based gameplay, so up until now the presentation has largely been about gorgeous hand-drawn 2D artwork. The world map has never needed to appear realistic or immersive, because it's always been about delivering at-a-glance information that allows gamers to sit back and ponder tactics. So, the switch to 3D might have worried a few fans out there, but you needn't worry.

The main difference to the gameplay with the fancy new 3D engine is that you can now rotate

the map 360 degrees and look at things in greater detail, zooming all the way in on items of interest. Sometimes hidden resources or goodies are tucked away behind objects, only revealing themselves if you change the angle of the camera. Other than these little hidden treats, the game looks and plays almost exactly like the Heroes games of old — especially if you zoom the camera out for the traditional top-down view. In fact, it was surprising just how similar the game feels to past incarnations — Heroes III in particular.

When the combat kicks in with an almost Final Fantasy-style blurry swirl, you'll find that the battles still play out on a small set grid, but there are now cinematic zooms for powerful attacks and the option to move the camera around to appreciate the nice new character designs and animations. Best of all, the core strategy play has been tightened up in such a

[up] Sorry El, no sand people...

way that this just might be the best incarnation of this game for a long time, even if Nival maybe played it a little too safe.

CRAP, IS THAT SUNRISE?

Before you start combat, there is now a Tactics Phase that allows you to rearrange your units into a battle-ready formation - such as fencing in your ranged units with beefier troops. We found that hitting the "Auto Arrange" button did a good enough job each and every time, as it's mostly about sorting out your units and making sure they're not stuck behind obstacles.
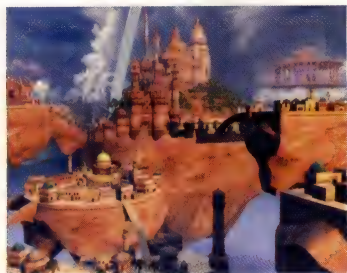
He's going to be finding sand in his armour for weeks

"You should totally see a doctor dude, glowy head can't be good"

Maybe this could have been made more in-depth in some ways, such as allowing you to split stacks.

You'll find that the Hero unit isn't actually on the battle grid anymore — they sit at the back and mostly cast spells to help or hinder the units on the battlefield. They also need to wait for their own turn. Much better. They do have a melee attack that can be used if you'd rather quickly take down an enemy unit or two, but it's not very powerful. It is, however, a "free hit", as a Hero's attack cannot be countered by any unit in the game. You see, when you hover your mouse above an enemy unit, you can see how many kills you're likely to get, but you can also see whether that particular unit will get to retaliate or not. You can

suffer a nasty loss in numbers if you attack a more powerful foe that has an opportunity to retaliate, so this definitely has you thinking twice.

Because there is now an initiative bar along the bottom of the screen, you can also see which units are queuing up to take their turn, which again can influence who you decide to pick on. When your Hero gains access to powerful "mass effect" spells, they can really help turn the tide of battle, such as hasting your entire army. There's nothing worse than seeing your units get shuffled to the back of the initiative bar.

Units also have more varied special abilities, such as the way archers are able to scatter shots across multiple targets, or how demons can gate in reinforcements that equal 30 percent of their stack strength, for a bit of extra cannon fodder. These really add a lot of flavour to the combat, and there should probably be more abilities across more of the unit types — some creatures feel a little dull or underpowered without a secondary talent.

One thing that we feel is missing is the ability to admit defeat at the beginning of combat if a mission critical character is obviously going to cark it. Sometimes it's clear that you're going to lose a battle, but there is no option to give up and quickly reload your game — you need to sit through the whole demoralising sequence, lose the battle, and then go back to the main menu. The good news is that every time you lose, you'll just keep on reloading, because this is another truly addictive strategy game for the turn-based tinkerers out there. <<

>> HEROES 101 - If you've never played a Heroes game before, it's all quite simple. You explore a world map with a limited number of movement points each turn, trying to beat your enemies to all the resources, treasure and armies you can find. If you find a stronghold, you start spending gold on upgrading it, which gives you access to more unit types to add to your army. You can also hire more Heroes to explore the map, until you're juggling multiple mobile armies and defending your stronghold. Now tie this all into a fantasy storyline with competing factions, and you've probably got the idea. Combat itself is another form of turn-based strategy — a more chess-like, paper/scissors/rock form of melee versus magic. It's simple, yet hellishly addictive.
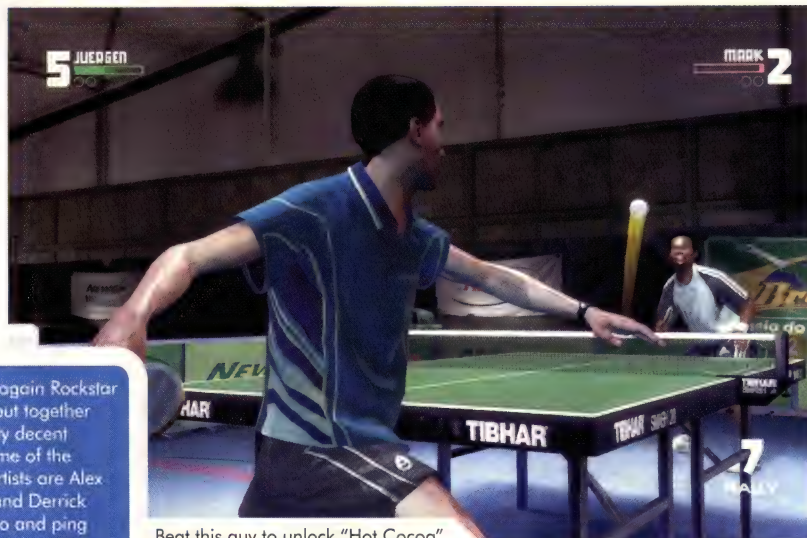
Once again Rockstar have put together a pretty decent soundtrack. Some of the most notable artists are Alex Smoke, A:Xus and Derrick May. Yes, techno and ping pong, together at last.

Beat this guy to unlock "Hot Cocoa"

No, she won't get in a car with you

ROCKSTAR GAMES PRESENTS
Table Tennis

CAM SHEA loves a good game of Whiff Whaff

›› It's no secret that just about every guy out there harbours a bizarre fixation with table tennis. Whether it was spawned from that rainy holiday away with the family where table tennis was the only thing to do, or from sparking a game up with mates after one too many grogs, recreational table tennis is part of the male psyche. We all love it, and we all think we're awesome at it.

Professional table tennis on the other hand is another breed entirely — incredibly fast and technical, it seems at odds with the home game, but in Rockstar Games Presents Table Tennis we have the best of both worlds. Intuitive and instantly accessible, this is a game that's fun to play right off the bat (sorry), but that also packs surprising depth.

STICKWORK

The main reason for this is that the mechanics are genius. Basic shots are performed with the face buttons or right analogue stick — A for top spin, Y for back spin, X for left spin and B for right spin, but you can also combine buttons (or use diagonal angles on the stick) for more complex

spin, and use the left bumper button as a soft shot modifier.

Anticipation is key as the longer you hold a button down before releasing the more spin and power you'll put on the ball. You position your player with the left analogue stick but once you hold down a button it's used for aiming (and the controller will vibrate strongly if you're going to hit the ball out, giving you a split second to correct your angle). Charging shots builds up your focus meter which goes through a red, yellow then green stage (each transition accompanied by a period of heightened returning), and using the focus button lets you deplete a little of the meter for a slow mo shot. If both players have built up their green meter the game enters a total focus zone where the surroundings fade to black and it's just you, your opponent and the table, which is a nice touch.

Each type of spin is colour coded, so for a top spin shot the ball will have a green trail (and arrows if you hit it sweetly enough), so you really need to pay attention to what type of shot you're returning as heavy spin

can change the bounce of the ball or angle of your return, and the higher the difficulty the easier it is to hit the ball out if you choose your shot/angle poorly. It's all about counter spin - returning with the same type of spin, so it really becomes a game not just of trying to get your opponent out of position but also of cleverly combating the spin they're using.

Of course, it's going to take a while to build up to that, and to be honest, the most fun way to do it is during multiplayer with friends. Two player is definitely the focus of this game (the single player is very rudimentary and gets pretty frustrating the further in you get), whether with friends or over Live — which works a treat incidentally.

Table Tennis isn't without its flaws — player positioning can be finicky, as can the difficulty levels, but as a whole Rockstar San Diego have created a game that is a triumph of focus. Well thought out gameplay mechanics, incredible graphics and animations and excellent sound effects all add up to bring the definitive game of videogame table tennis to Xbox 360. ‹‹

AVAILABLE ON:
X360 / PS3 / WII

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Table Tennis
PLAYERS: 1-2
DEVELOPER: Rockstar San Diego
PUBLISHER: Rockstar
PRICE: $69.95
RATING: G
AVAILABLE: Now

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Deep and accessible mechanics, visuals, great multiplayer.

MINUS: Single player can be frustrating.

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
91	91	82

OVERALL

83

The best virtual table tennis money can buy...

!!! That other classic old school game getting a makeover - Micro Machines - didn't quite make it in this month. Next issue we promise...

It's like Sputnik; spherical yet pointy in parts

NEWCASTLE ⇧ 0 - 0 ⇧ LONDON REDS

So... much... head

EDIT KIT - WOLFBOYS

Sensible Soccer 2006

ELIOT FISH creates the mighty Seafood FC.

>> Sensible Soccer was mad fun over 10 years ago, but can its quirky, soccer-on-speed gameplay still cut it in 2006? If you're looking for fun, fast, arcade play, then yes it can. Whilst Codemasters has stuck to the same good old Sensible formula, they've also been content to do the bare minimum in bringing this game to the current generation. As fun as it is, it still could have been better.

GOAL! ER... ANOTHER GOAL!
What we have here is a game that is almost identical to the classic original, with a few neat ideas added to the mix. The game is still played from that legendary vertical-scrolling top down view, though the players now have cute oversized heads to go with their munchkin bodies.

If memory serves, the original game was played with a single button. That has now been upgraded to a remarkable two buttons — one for passing, one for shooting. Naturally, these moves are versatile — you can use the pass button to hit a shot across the ground into goal, or you can use the shoot button to cross the ball or hit an up-field pass.

Tackling for the ball is simply about running into the other player and over the top of the ball in the hope of gaining possession, although there is also a slide tackle move when you want to cut someone down.

Also new to the mix is the ability to add after-touch to your scorching drives and volleys. As your players run around, a small arrow indicates which direction they are facing — which is exactly where the ball will go if you kick it. The longer you hold down the button, the more power on the pass or shot. This way, if you're running at goal, you need to keep in mind that your player arrow need be pointing roughly in the right direction. Once you shoot, you can continue to add curve to the ball as it flies through the air, resulting in some awesome bending shots into the top corner.

It can take a few games to get used to the way the automatic camera lurches around the screen, as well as the automatic player switching — but before too long, you'll be pinging the ball around and enjoying some pretty high scoring matches. It's fast and frenzied football action, which makes

it perfect for multiplayer sessions. Grab friends and play co-operatively or against a team of mates for some hilarious gaming. Custom create your own tournaments, your very own teams (design your own strip etc) and get stuck into it.

Sadly, there is no online play, which should have been dead easy with a game engine as simple as this. This is one of a few mistakes with this update. The tactics screen is also a mess of player ratings that can be difficult to make heads or tails of at first. The player rosters were also hopelessly out of date, with many clubs still using players that left almost a full year ago. Except of course, there are no real player names here anyway, so you'll need to slave away with the team editor. Adding to the gripes, the goal celebrations are limited and you'll end up seeing the same animations over and over again.

We're thankful that the key Sensible Soccer style of play is intact, but the game could have had a lot more polish and a lot more attention paid to the menus and general presentation. Otherwise, it's a smash to play. <<

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Sweet Sensi gameplay with aftertouch, great party game.

MINUS: Lacks polish, no real player names or likenesses.

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
72	65	84

OVERALL

80

Pure multiplayer fun you'll load up time and time again.

License tests are back, but unfortunately they're almost all adapted from GT4 and do little to instruct beginners on the nuances of bike handling.
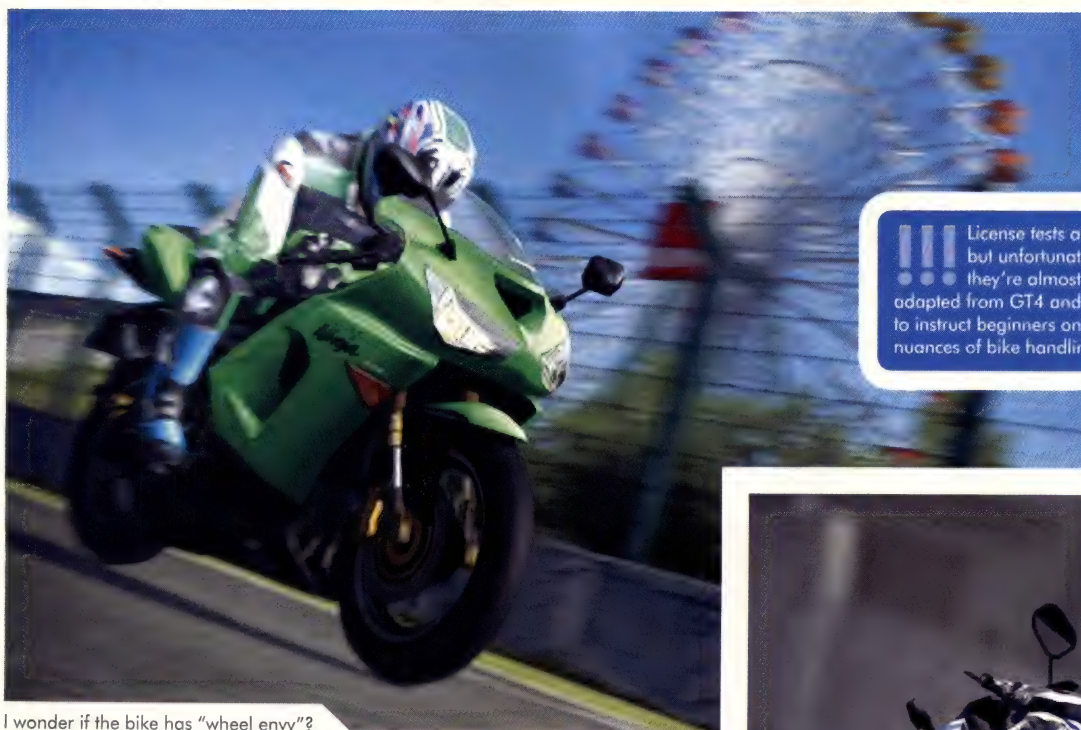
I wonder if the bike has "wheel envy"?

At last year's E3 this would have been called "In Game Footage"

Tourist Trophy: THE REAL RIDING SIM

MARCH STEPNIK discovers that it's a lot like Gran Turismo, only it's also not…

>> So really, Tourist Trophy is a completely natural evolution of the classy and technically beautiful Gran Turismo series. If what Polyphony Digital does is make games that epitomise the worship of high class machines, expert handling and driving at insane speeds, then Tourist Trophy takes this idea and absolutely guns it, even if it does so with two wheels less. It's a smart evolution to boot; Polyphony Digital already has the brilliant game engine — surely it wouldn't take much to shift the focus to motorbike love, eh?

CHOO CHOO CHOOSE ME?

Tourist Trophy strikes a fine balance between asset recycling and satisfactory substantial change. Make no mistake about it — Tourist Trophy looks, breathes and feels a lot like GT4, down to the license tests, interface, even the photo mode. Most of GT4's roster of courses reappear in TT (although you do get some bike-specific new ones too), as does the familiar structure of competing in cups, so for the most part there's a strong sense

of dejavu as you navigate through the early stages of the game. In the area of bike worship there's a bunch of real two wheelers to choose from (100 different ones, including scooters, performance bikes and museum pieces) and the body of the rider is now selectable (you choose yours at the start of the career mode; height only, not shape), meaning that you can also unlock and buy all manner of different licensed apparel and helmets.

As for the actual driving bits — which from now on will be referred to properly as the riding bits — well, this is where everything changes and TT really stands on its own. It's clear that Polyphony has really nutted this one out; riding a bike's really quite different to driving on four wheels, and there's been a tangible change to the overall feel of racing to do it all justice. Sure, you've still got to maintain the correct racing line and it's all about the speed at which you take your turns, but now you need to take into consideration the position of your bike. See, it's all about weight transfer; the point at which your bike will spill in a turn is

a threat you cannot take lightly and highlights the real difference racing on two wheels has to four. Instability is an ever biting concern, and TT's particularly unforgiving when you veer off the track. Where in the GT series you can still recover from a bit of sloppy driving, TT requires ninja-like levels of precision. Go trackside for whatever reason and you'll certainly eat some dirt.

TT requires an unfaltering level of skill to be enjoyed properly, and dedication is rewarded with some trademark exhilarating small touches. In proportion to the levels of frustration at the beginner levels of TT, the feeling of flying down a straight at breakneck speed with the sound of wind and vibration from wind resistance to your helmet is an enthralling reward. You'll just have to work for it.

Tourist Trophy is, ultimately, Gran Turismo 4 without the training wheels. It's really the hardest racing game on consoles at the moment — one for fans of motorbikes or anyone looking for a new challenge. For everyone else, TT sadly just isn't a pick up and play sorta game. <<

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Beautiful, fast and solid game modes.

MINUS: Bloody difficult, weak license tests.

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
85	89	70

OVERALL

80

You've never played GT like this before.

Powerful enough to detect interest.

The Navy's fleet of ANZAC Frigates are equipped with the latest very long-range surveillance radar.

Wade Barker
Navy Electronic Technician

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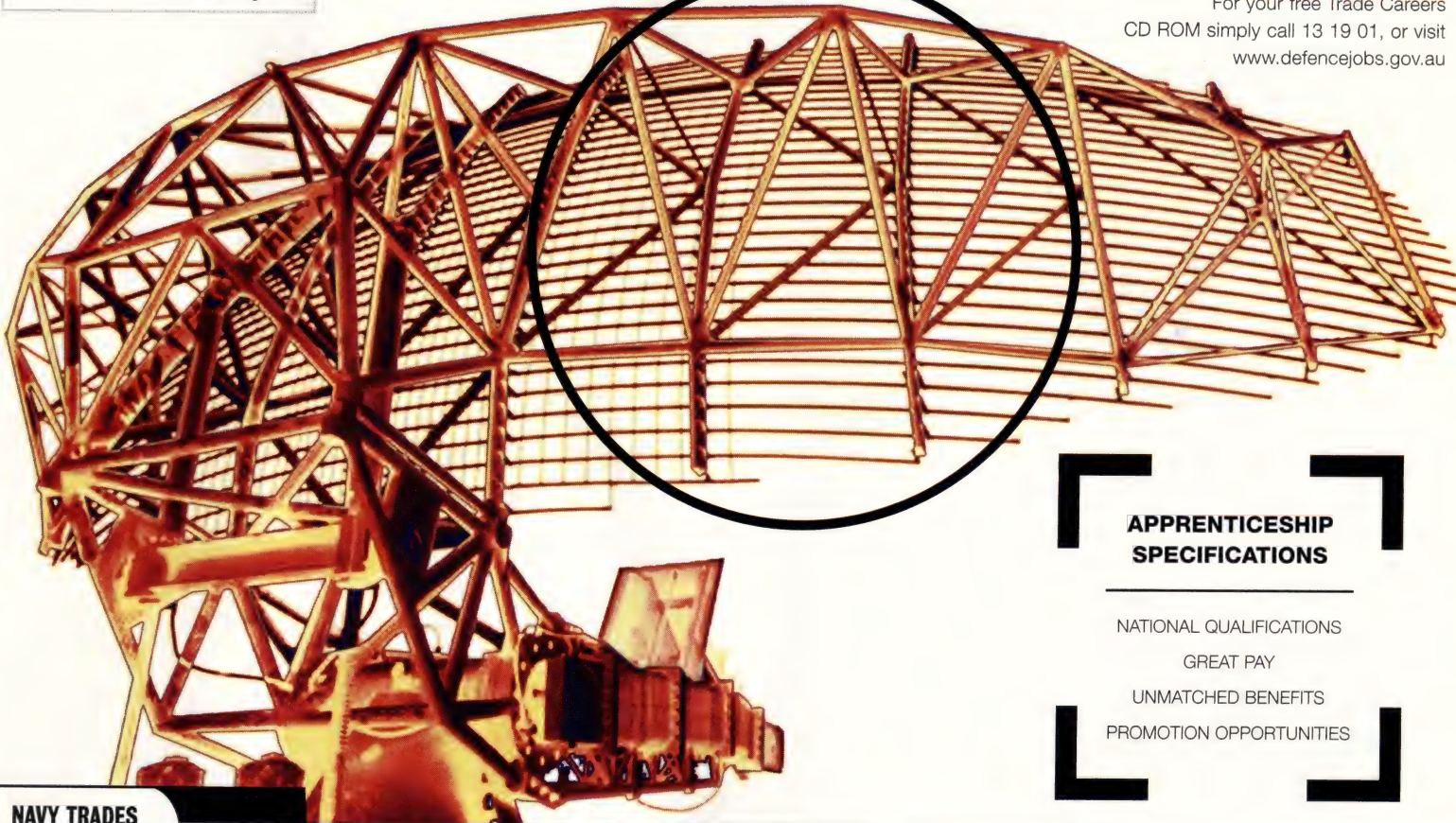
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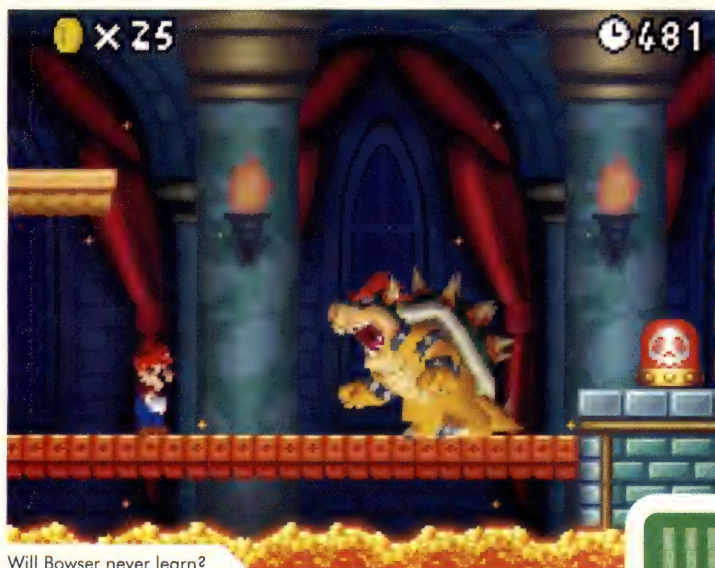
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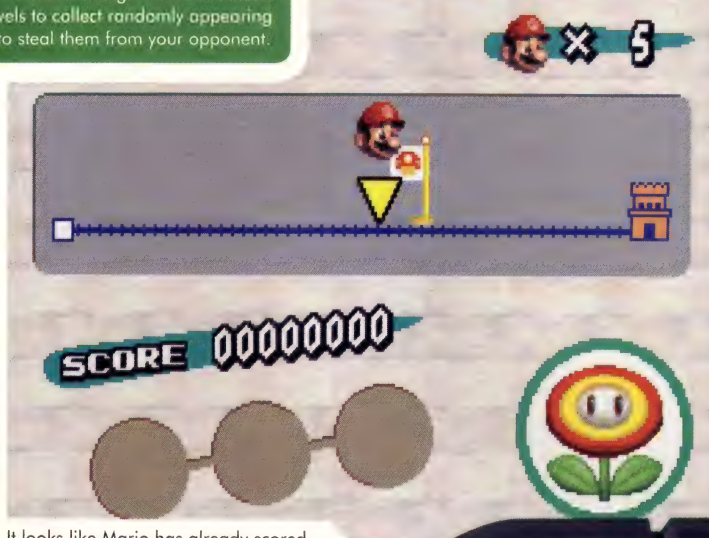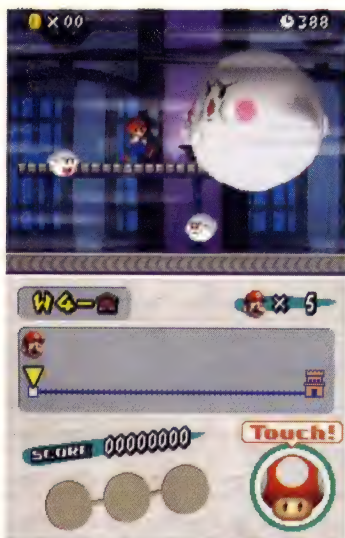# Call 13 19 01 or visit www.defencejobs.gov.au
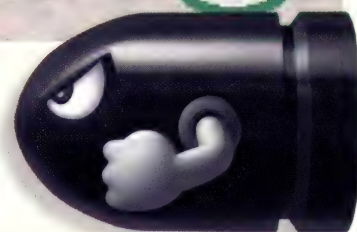
Will Bowser never learn?

|||| The game even comes with awesome two-player wireless play. It's Mario Vs Luigi in a dash across looping levels to collect randomly appearing Stars – or to steal them from your opponent.

It looks like Mario has already scored...

New Super Mario Bros.

Once upon a time Nintendo were the undisputed kings of the 2D platform genre. Both Super Mario World and Yoshi's Island are regarded as two of the greatest platform games of all time, so when Nintendo announced a brand new Mario Bros title the whole gaming world sat up and took notice. And well we should because New Super Mario Bros. delivers.

PROFESSOR SHIGGY
Taking the classic game design of the NES and SNES titles as a starting point, then deftly changing and refining them, New Super Mario Bros. is a yet another lesson in

simple, elegant and clever design. There's something so innately satisfying about the presentation and mechanics of the 2D Super Mario Bros games: the gameworld is clean and easy to understand, but the mechanics give you great scope for exploration, and the heritage of the design is such that you know that there are going to be countless secrets to discover.

By way of example, in Super Mario World, once you had the cape you could take a dashing run up, then soar into the air, exploring areas that had hitherto been inaccessible. Suddenly levels opened right up, and the player was driven to roam the

skies of as many levels as possible. For New Super Mario Bros. the cape is no more, but in its stead are three new powerups. Mini Mario shrinks Mario down to diminutive status but with an exaggerated jump. In this form he can run along the surface of water and enter the tiny pipes that you'll come across in some levels. One slip-up, however, and you'll be restarting the level. Mega Mario is the complete opposite. Grab an oversize orange mushroom and you'll transform Mario into a screen filling giant, able to plough through almost any structure or enemy in the level. Naturally this only lasts for a brief period. There's also Shell Mario, which is the most unwieldy but also potentially the most fun powerup. As Shell Mario a brief dash run will start you spinning along the ground in your shell and in this form you can plough through most enemies as well as jump. The trick is that you move quite fast and hitting any vertical surface sends you careening back in the opposite direction, so it's really only useful in certain places.

The new powerups however, while not rare, are really bonuses. The normal evolution of powerups ends on Fire Mario, with only a few instances within levels where you'll get the other three. That said, there are numerous places to pick them up outside levels. Scattered across the hub world are mushroom huts, each of which you can visit once to get a powerup, which is then stored on the powerup slot on the touch screen. Yes, you can now have a spare powerup in reserve and simply tap it with your finger to drop it down to Mario in game.

The trick with the bonus powerups is obviously to know when to use them – the Mini Mario in particular, as they're one shots that are easily wasted, so that's an added layer that you'll need to take notice of if you hope to find all the secrets and collectables. Speaking of which, each level has three Star Coins to find, and you can spend accrued coins to access the mushroom huts as well as

Time to lay off the mushrooms Mr Plumber

alternate paths through each world. It's a really good system, pushing you to find all the coins and revisit levels with the right powerup when necessary. Thankfully that's not the only way to get bonuses going into levels. Red question mark squares with wings (as well as Hammer Bros) also roam the hub world, pausing over levels. Go into that level while the question mark lurks above and you'll be able to bop it near the start of the level and get one of several powerups. Unfortunately they're not always all that appropriate for the level at hand.

Of course, Nintendo have also shaken up the basic gameplay mechanics too. You can now do the Mario 64 triple jump, sidle along ledges, swing on ropes and best of all, wall jump. Yes, you can bop back and forth up walls, a move which just has so much potential. Whether Nintendo have realised that potential however is debatable, with the move only really coming into play every so often, which is a little disappointing, simply because it's so much fun to do and really changes the level design when it is called into use. Moves that have returned are mostly no brainers

– dashing, ducking, sliding, butt stomping, grabbing and throwing items, climbing fences and swimming. It's a good ability set and will almost instantly become second nature to anyone who's played a 2D Mario title before.

TOO EASY, OR JUST RIGHT?

The layout of the hub world is a little less engaging than the system used in Super Mario World, and although each world has numerous bonus levels to access — and indeed, there are even two whole worlds that you'll have to work out how to get to — we can't help but wish that Nintendo had made things a little more mysterious. Where is the Star Road for instance? And where are the incredibly challenging levels? By and large New Super Mario Bros. is a little easy for the veterans, although getting every single Star Coin will keep you going for a while.

Another quibble we have is that the team haven't even made a half-hearted nod towards a story. No,

Peach gets kidnapped and on every single world you face Bowser Jr or one of his minions not once but twice, before he runs to the next castle/world. It's really lazy and repetitive design and the boss encounters are the single worst thing about this game. Hey Nintendo — just put Peach in the final castle in the final world next time. Seeing her whisked away twice per world is really dull.

It's a good thing then, that the strengths of the game more than make up for its shortcomings. Level design is by and large very good, the soundtrack is as catchy as ever, and the presentation is superb. Of particular note, the move to polygonal characters works really well, and while remaining true to its roots in the simplicity of the presentation, there are plenty of small visual flourishes that really help make the game look more modern. A must-buy for every Nintendo fan.

Cam Shea
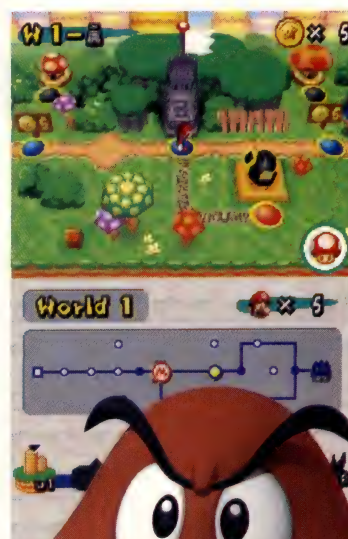
AVAILABLE ON:
DS / PSP / GBA

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Platformer
PLAYERS: 1-4
DEVELOPER: Nintendo
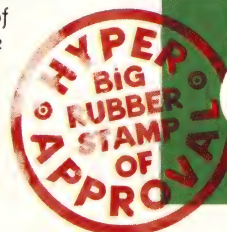**PUBLISHER:** Nintendo
PRICE: $69.95
RATING: G
AVAILABLE: Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
90	90	92

HYPER BIG RUBBER STAMP OF APPROVAL

OVERALL
91

Dr Kawashima's Brain Training: HOW OLD IS YOUR BRAIN?

It's quite hard to label Brain Training as a "game" in any typical sense of the word, because much like Electroplankton and Nintendogs before it, Brain Training is part of Nintendo's new philosophy of introducing the casual or non-gamer to gaming. A huge success in Japan, selling in the millions of copies, Brain Training lets players take part in numerous activities and tests in order to keep their brain healthy and active. Regardless of the actual scientific benefits, Brain Training takes simple activities such as reading aloud, completing simple maths equations, and memorising numbers and patterns, and turns

them into fun activities. In a nutshell you'll get out of Brain Training what you put in; if the idea of completing little tasks on a daily basis and comparing said results with family and friends sounds like fun then this becomes a great piece of software.

When you first create your profile, Brain Training will put you through a Stroop Test (reading the colours of words as opposed to their spelling) making full use of the title's voice recognition system. From this the game will determine your initial 'brain age' (mine being a rather disturbing '63') and from here it'll be up to you to train your brain via completing tasks on a daily basis, with the option to re-calculate your brain age once each day — with the overall goal being to reach a ripe old brain age of '20'. In addition to voice recognition Brain Training can also recognise your handwritten responses, with
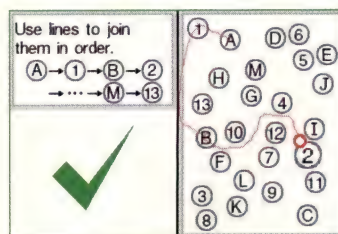
incredible accuracy, which makes the maths portion and Sudoku puzzles a lot of fun to play. It's not perfect but it's pretty darn close, and the only time the voice recognition system seems to stumble is when you need to say the word "blue", which you'll have to pronounce ten different ways before it'll understand.

From a design perspective, Brain Training is not a title that is meant to keep you hooked for hours at a time, it specifically sets out to be a habitual presence with you picking it up to play for a few minutes at a time on a daily or bi-daily basis. Thankfully the multiplayer component complements this by making the experience vocal, competitive and quite communal. Nintendo's goal with the unconventional Brain Training has definitely been met - it's not quite a game but nevertheless an interesting and above all rewarding experience, and one that's great to share with those close to you, young or old.

Kosta Andreadis
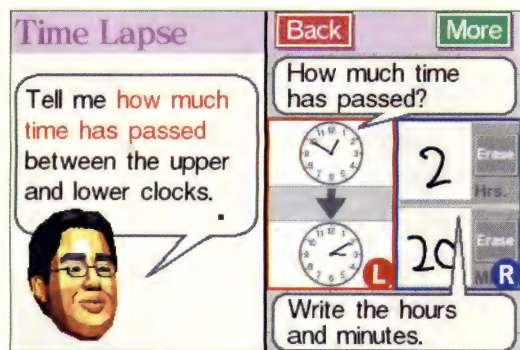
[up] If Cam wanted to learn he would have stayed in school

AVAILABLE ON:
DS / PSP / GBA

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Learning Sim
PLAYERS: 1-Multi
DEVELOPER: Nintendo
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
PRICE: $49.95
RATING: G
AVAILABLE: June 15

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
70	60	80

OVERALL 80

Lost Magic

When players encountered a boss in Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow, they had to use the touch screen and stylus to cast a finishing move spell within a short amount of time. Although a tiny portion of that game, Lost Magic takes the concept of casting spells via drawing simple line patterns on the touch screen and builds an entire game around it. The end result, although far from perfect, is an interesting

experience that feels and plays a lot like a simplistic Fire Emblem.

In Lost Magic players take control of Isaac the son of a famous sage who dies or something. His wand gets passed down, and no doubt he'll want to avenge his father's death, save the world, get the girl, buy a new TV, etc. It's pretty basic and as you don't get to explore the game world or any towns for that matter, the game itself relies solely on the concept — using the stylus as a wand to cast spells in different skirmishes. Thankfully this portion of the game is executed quite well with the ability to cast large numbers of spells where the accuracy of your casting determines the power of each spell, making this one of the game's coolest features. The strategy portion of the title comes from the ability to capture monsters and foes that you come across, allowing you build up a squad that you can take, and control, into each battle.

Moving on any given map is quite similar to that of a PC RTS. Select your character then 'click' on the desired point in the map you want to move to, with movement of multiple characters

[up] When simple geometry attacks redux

[up] He's just misunderstood

or monsters handled via dragging the cursor. The only problem with this system is that if you need to get from point A to E you need to click/select characters at each interval making a relatively simple movement A to B, B to C, C to D, and D to E. A minor gripe to be sure but when you need to control a larger number of units it quickly becomes annoying

especially when the AI dictates that all monsters will attack and chase anything that comes within close proximity to their current location.

In the end, Lost Magic is both enjoyable and frustrating, it makes great use of the touch screen for spell casting but that on its own doesn't make up for the other shortcomings and overall lack of variety.

Kosta Andreadis
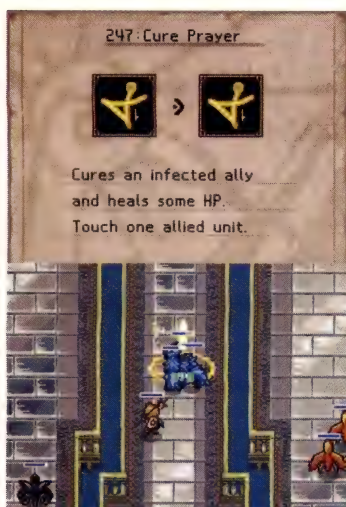
[up] Upside-down 4 is healing?

AVAILABLE ON:
DS / PSP / GBA

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Strategy/RPG
PLAYERS: 1-Multi
DEVELOPER: Taito Corporation
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
PRICE: $69.95
RATING: PG
AVAILABLE: TBA

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
65	70	70

OVERALL 68

This is why you need friends

!!! I can carry a Wyvern egg safely through dangerous territory but drop it in camp?

Monster Hunter Freedom

There is something intrinsically cool about hitting a dinosaur with a sword. It's hard to put our finger on just why that is; it could be racial memory (don't give me all that "scientific" guff about humans and dinosaurs never coexisting — Hollywood has proven you brainiacs wrong on many an occasion) or it could just be that hitting giant lizards with pointy (or blunt) objects sounds like a fun thing to do. The RPG/Slash 'em Up franchise from Capcom has finally made it to handheld form in modified port of the PS2 game Monster Hunter. Players take the role of a Monster Hunter and strangely enough they go out and hunt monsters, as well as other sidelines such as fishing, herb collecting and cooking juicy steaks cut from freshly killed reptiles.

NOT WITHOUT ITS CHARM

Design wise Monster Hunter Freedom is quite awe inspiring. The world is large and beautifully realised, the character creation is quite impressive for a handheld and many of the animations are absolutely charming, such as when the player's avatar flops down on a bed before sleep or runs with a bowed back when carrying something heavy or fragile. A large selection of equipment as well as numerous craftable items keeps the game interesting as well as you'll often find new ingredients to experiment with.

Unfortunately the game falls down when it comes to control; it's at once too simple and too frustrating to be a fully satisfying experience. As is a problem with pretty much every handheld third person action title, players have to either constantly re-centre the camera with a shoulder button or switch from thumbstick control to rotate the camera with the d-pad, something that becomes increasingly frustrating as the missions progress as you will often find yourself facing multiple enemies at once and can only block in the direction you're facing. The combat system utilises two buttons for attacks and another for blocking. This mechanic is approachable but offers little in the way of depth, making combat more of a chore than it really needs to be in a game all about killing things, but if you can get past this flaw the dozens of missions available do offer a rather lengthy play time.

The real strength of the game

[up] Where's Christian Bale when you need him?

lays in the immersion of the world — it really is a beautiful place you want to explore, especially through multiplayer via an ad-hoc 1-4 player network. To enter a multiplayer game all a player need do is enter the guild hall. Once inside you will be able to see the other avatars and you can undertake some of the more difficult missions in co-op. Many of the control problems inherent in the single player game are glossed over once you have a few other hunters in the party as players are able to focus on individual monsters instead of having to constantly switch from the thumbstick to the d-pad to focus on one of the many mobs attacking you. With a group of friends, Monster Hunter Freedom can be a great experience but when played solo it offers more frustration than true fun.

Daniel Wilks

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
88	86	70

OVERALL

68

X-Men: The Offical Game

⟫⟫ Leaving aside the fact that calling the newest game in the X-Men franchise "The Official Game" basically means that all of the games that came before it were somehow unofficial and the cover art/title doesn't equate the game to the movie unless you're familiar with the X-Men 3 movie poster art, X-Men: The Official Game still manages to be a rather lackluster title.

With events taking place before the new movie, X-Men: TOG attempts to fill in some of the back-story and other significant plot points such as why Nightcrawler will be absent from the film. As such the game only stars three of the X-Men; perennial favourite Wolverine, Nightcrawler and Iceman. Whilst the first two play much like you would expect with Wolverine as a straightforward brawler and Nightcrawler as the agility/fast movement/semi-stealth character, the mechanics of Iceman seem to be rather inappropriate. Iceman is the game's token flying hero so he spends his time cruising around on ice slides shooting other flying things. The idea itself is OK but the handling is way too slow and imprecise. The whole idea of Iceman as the flying character is a little questionable as there are far more appropriate characters to use, such as Storm.

Other problems raise their heads as well. The majority of levels are made up of simple repetition — go to this area, beat up the guards/break a machine, head to next area, rinse, repeat. Add to this the fact that the Xbox 360 graphics only offer a slight upgrade from Xbox and that the cutscenes are slightly animated but otherwise still images (assumedly in an attempt to make the game look like a comic book, even though it is attached to a film) and you get the definite feeling that X-Men: TOG was rushed to meet the film deadline.

Uosdwis R dewoh

Worms Open Warfare

⟫⟫ 2D Worms still rocks, and the PSP is the perfect system to bring it to. Pity then, that although this controls well and is certainly the most attractive 2D Worms game to date, it also feels a little slapdash in many respects, and there are numerous changes and omissions that will have old school Worms fans scratching their heads.

All the basics are there — randomly generated environments, cute-at-first-but-soon-annoying sound bites, wireless multiplayer, the backflip, shotgun and ninja rope. Hop into a game and this is classic Worms given a neat makeover, with nice textures and decent effects on explosions and teleporting, as well as the trademark animations on the worms. But then you find out that you can no longer aim for the head with the shotgun. Oh well, no biggie. Hang on a sec, where are the flames from the explosive barrel that inevitably set off a huge chain reaction and have worms bouncing all over the place? And what happened to the baseball bat? And the holy hand grenade? And why can't I swap the worm I'm controlling? Limited worm swaps was incredibly important to strategy, allowing you to quickly shore up worms in weak positions. In fact, why even change this stuff?

We're left with gameplay that's actually inferior to Worms titles of old. And get this, Open Warfare is even missing an entire mode. Gone are the Missions from previous games, to be replaced by, well, nothing. There are still Challenges, and they were always what I returned to in single player, but it just smacks of laziness when they omit the game mode that would have taken the most design work.

This is still a fantastic game — and if you have friends you can play against wirelessly, it's worth getting, but we can't help but feel a little dissed.

Cam Shea

Me and My Katamari

⟫⟫ We are hoping you have all had fun with Katamari. So much fun. Playing with Our ball is always fun. Ho ho ho. So round and sticky. How could We ever get enough of Katamari? Is it possible? Two games isn't enough! And now it's on PSP. Amazing. A minature universe crammed onto a UMD, without all the annoying empty bits. So delicious, so portable.

It seems We may have had an accident. Relaxing too hard at the beach after a hard day's interstellar construction. Just a tiny tsunami. Hardly Our fault, but the animals need our help. And we are nothing if not gracious. And incredibly masculine. So, roll on! Make them some islands my dear lazy Prince. Terra firma, por favor. Chop, chop!

What's that? The analog sticks are missing? Just use the D-pad and buttons, silly! Make do with what you have, don't grumble about what you have not. But the King of All Cosmos is understanding, too. Yes, it is harder to control the Katamari. Yes, it does seem to get stuck in places where it wouldn't before. No, it doesn't seem to have as much momentum. Frustrating, you say. Challenging, We say. But not insurmountable! More Kosciusko than Kilimanjaro.

We see some of Our subjects may have had their expectations too high. They want more levels, more variety. More, more, more. So insatiable. *Sigh*. But one moment... There are more songs! More Cousins! More Presents! (We especially like rookie Kenta and his Dragon hat). And the Katamari is still fun, especially when it rolls over cats. So, more fun!

Are we finished yet? Splendid! Time to get back to Our Queen. Hyper Rainbow!

King of All Cosmos

AVAILABLE ON:
XBOX 360 / XBOX / PS2 / PC / GCN

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Action / **PLAYERS:** 1 / **DEV:** Z-Axis / **PUBLISHER:** Activision / **PRICE:** $79.95 (PS2, Xbox), $109.95 (Xbox 360) / **RATING:** M / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
83	85	65	64

AVAILABLE ON:
DS / **PSP** / GBA

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Strategy / **PLAYERS:** 1-4 / **DEVELOPER:** Team 17 / **PUBLISHER:** THQ / **PRICE:** $69.95 / **RATING:** PG / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
85	80	85	79

AVAILABLE ON:
DS / **PSP** / GBA

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Ball rolling / **PLAYERS:** 1-4 / **DEVELOPER:** Namco / **PUBLISHER:** EA / **PRICE:** $44.95 / **RATING:** G / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
85	87	90	81

Killer wigs and beards were the show's greatest strength

Mr. Show
THE COMPLETE COLLECTION (IMPORT REVIEW)

HBO, UNRATED

>> "I'm Sorry Mr. and Mrs. Odenkirk. It's simply too late to have an abortion. Your son is four years old."

"Mommy? What's a Grogortion?"

Although it features some of the finest absurdist comedy ever to grace television screens, almost a decade after its premiere, Mr. Show still remains virtually unheard of. Unlike other shows that have reached "cult" status, Mr. Show's appeal isn't limited to a small audience, as any self respecting comedy fan or anyone with a keen sense of humor for that matter will find much to like here - think of it as America's answer to Monty Python.

Mr. Show was a sketch comedy series that ran in the late 90s on HBO that featured the comedic talents of Bob Odenkirk and David Cross (who you may know as Tobias in Arrested Development). Creating a more free form approach to sketch-based comedy, each sketch within a particular Mr. Show episode tied together in some way, doing away with the need for punch lines, and in the process, opening the door to

[up] Isn't that dude in Def Leppard?

brilliance. But beyond its unique structure one thing remains certain - Mr. Show is absolutely hilarious. As funny as the premises are, such as the East Coast/West Coast Ventriloquism War which mimics the coastal feud between rappers, the self explanatory Racist in the Year 3000, to the Pre-Taped Call-In Show where each week the topic of discussion is not what's currently airing on TV but next week's, it was a combination of writing, performance and timing that helped elevate many of the show's sketches to the level of comedic genius. It's insane this guy's taint!

Kosta Andreadis

MOVIE: 10 / EXTRAS: 8

No prizes for guessing what he's saying

The Aristocrats

DENDY, R 18+

>> If you can stomach the literal cavalcade of profanity and depravity contained within the 90 odd minutes running time you'll see on of the funniest, most joyous treatise on comedy and the mind of the comedian ever made. If you don't think you can stand 90 minutes of jokes about incest, coprophagy and bestiality then you may as well not read any further but if you can, The Aristocrats should be on your must see list. Using the simple premise of having a metric craptonne of comedians tell the same vaudeville joke, Pen Jillette (of Penn & Teller fame) and Paul Provenza craft a documentary that is part hilarity and part eye opening spectacle; if you didn't believe before that comedians aren't quite right in the head, you will once the credits roll.

The Aristocrats, the joke from which the film takes its title is only really a joke by definition. A family walk into a talent agents' office, perform the most luridly disgusting act imaginable and, when asked the name of the performance happily exclaim "The Aristocrats". While the

[up] Almost as filthy as Bob Sagat's version

beginning of the joke and the end of the joke are set pretty much in stone, the core of the joke, the act itself is a glorious act of improvisation and it is this improvisation that serves in turn as the core of the documentary. Through these improvised performances we not only see the joke retold in many different ways, both clean and filthy but also are allowed a glimpse into the mind of the comedians themselves. It's simultaneously fascinating, funny and grotesque and backed up with an excellent suite of special features including a funny commentary by Jillette and Provenza, an hour and a half of extra footage that essentially form a whole other documentary and a nine minute version of the joke made up of the most lurid descriptions in the film.

Daniel Wilks

MOVIE: 9 / EXTRAS: 10

Underworld: Evolution

SONY PICTURES, MA 15+

It's silly, it's gory and Kate Beckinsale has a great arse that looks amazing in something skin tight and black. Those 20 words could ably constitute a review of *Underworld: Evolution* but considering I have a few hundred more words allotted to me for the review I should go into more detail. *Underworld: Evolution* will never be confused for a good movie but under the right circumstances, those circumstances being a few beers and mates, it is a lot of fun, mostly due to the fact that writer/director Len Wiseman and spouse/star Kate Beckinsale know exactly what type of film they are making — a trashy spectacle. In an interview when the sequel was first announced, Beckinsale joked that since the first movie was, in essence, all about her arse, the next was going to go out on a limb and be about her breasts. Whilst this statement may not necessarily be true (the film is

[up] I can hear Amos drooling from here

still ostensibly about the rear end) it sums up the attitude of the film perfectly — give the punters what they want. So what we have is a sniff of story about ancient blood feuds, even more ancient bloodlines, Derek Jacobi looking slightly embarrassed, betrayal and dark secrets, a hell of a lot of vampire vs werewolf action, some outlandish gore and one of the single most telegraphed villain deaths to grace the screen. It's a film you not so much watch as ogle and there's nothing wrong with that if you have the beer and popcorn.

Daniel Wilks

MOVIE: 6 / EXTRAS: 6

Beckinsale sees, err, green

The real life Big Friendly Giant

The Year of the Yao

ROADSHOW ENTERTAINMENT, PG

Following Chinese basketball sensation, the 7 foot 6 Yao Ming, *The Year of the Yao* tracks his progress from the moment the Houston Rockets get the first draft pick of 2002 and use it to bring Yao Ming out from China through to the end of his first season.

It's a fascinating journey filled with highs and lows. Yao isn't just a professional sportsman moving from one country to another, he's seen as an ambassador for China and Chinese culture, he's the first draft pick meaning that every basketball fan in the country is going to be watching his every move and his team have pinned all their hopes on him taking them into the playoffs. *Throw in coming* from a culture that promotes a

teamwork mentality and arriving in an aggressive star driven trash talking blinged up American vision of basketball and Yao obviously had a lot of hurdles to overcome and even more at stake.

In many ways the story is as much about the sweet natured Yao finding a close friend in his interpreter, as much as it is about basketball, which really helps ground it. And while his first season may have been bitter sweet, there's no doubt the kid can play, with some electrifying footage. *The Year of the Yao* is an insight into basketball, nationalism, hardcore sports fans and finding common ground across cultures. Well worth a look.

Celia Hobart

MOVIE: 7 / EXTRAS: 5

Lano of the Dead

The Island

LIBERATION MUSIC, M

With Lano & Woodley currently wrapping up their *Goodbye* tour after an epic 20 years as a comedy duo, it's as good a time as any to review *The Island* — the DVD release of their critically acclaimed tour from a few years ago. Breaking a little from tradition, they incorporated one main prop for the show — a mechanical stairway device that could be raised and lowered like a see-saw, as well as spun around. The show cleverly incorporated it, whether it be as the steps to their apartment, the plane, or the palm tree on the island on which they found themselves marooned in the show.

Aside from the stairway, the show is very much Lano & Woodley as

we know and love them. Stacks of banter, physical comedy, audience asides and participation (made more entertaining as it flies in the face of the central conceit of being alone on an island), and a well rehearsed script that still manages to leave you unsure where the script ends and the ad libbing begins.

It's a great show (although if you've seen the *Goodbye* show there's a fair bit of crossover) and the DVD packs some great extras. In addition to interviews and behind the scenes, Lano & Woodley do a full length commentary which is hugely entertaining. This release won't necessarily win over new fans, but is a must-buy for the long term Lano & Woodley freaks.

Max Combo

MOVIE: 8 / EXTRAS: 7

Saiyuki Reload VOLUME 1

PRODUCTION: DENTSU
GENRE: ACTION/COMEDY

>> In the world of Shangri-la, where demons and humans once co-existed, chaos is on the rise. A group are trying to resurrect an ancient and powerful demon called Gyumaoh, causing demonic energy to sweep the land and the demons to turn evil. A small band of fighters known as the Sanzo group have had enough, and are journeying West into India to stop it.

That was the premise of the first (and rather long) season of *Saiyuki*, and now again for *Reload*. The plot, by and large, is just an excuse for the action, so if you haven't seen the first set of DVDs it won't take too long to get into the spirit of the series — although working out who all the side characters are may take a little longer. Fortunately it's pretty good fun from the word go. This is a series that's all about cool bad-ass characters doing cool bad-ass things, with plenty of laughs along the way.

The team's leader, Genjo Sanzo, is a rogue priest whose weapon of choice is a six shooter (held side on) and whose interests are entirely self serving. He's impossibly cool and constantly smoking. As is Sha Gojyo, the quick tempered member of the group who wields a half moon blade on a long chain. The other two members are the always calm magic user Cho Hakkai aka Hawk-eye, and the obligatory kid, Son Goku who wields a staff and has a gold band around his head. Yes, it's Monkey for the 21st century.

There's nothing particularly outstanding about *Saiyuki Reload*, but the brief spurts of stylised violence and the interactions between characters will keep you entertained. And the comedic vignettes at the end of each episode are gold.

Saiyuki is also yet another series that seems to throw random English at you in the title song, with the catchcry "Wild Wild Rock" and awesome lines in Japanese like "The crazy highway of disarmament, jump it up, wild rock!" It's nonsensical, but it also perfectly sets the tone.
Dirk Watch

**ANIMATION: 6 / STORY: 6
EXTRAS: 1 / OVERALL: 6**

Irrepressible? Bah, he's more McCauley Culkin than Monkey

Spirit of Wonder

PRODUCTION: STUDIO AJIADO
GENRE: DRAMA/COMEDY

>> Produced back in 1991, but set in the 50s, *Spirit of Wonder* is an interesting mish mash of an OAV series. Leaping straight into things with the episode "The Shrinking of Miss China" in which the very lovingly drawn 'titular' character China; restaurateur, land lady and kung fu expert, is accidentally shrunk down to the size of a match head by a science experiment gone wrong. It's zany and funny and entirely without context, but hey, no doubt this sets the tone for the entire disc.

Wrong. The next two episodes, part one and two of the "Scientific Boys Club", while still retaining the zany scientist angle, are oddly paced, leaping from serious to irrational to meditative from one scene to the next. The main arc is about the 50 year anniversary of a club formed by three young boys, now old men, and their dream of journeying to Mars and discovering life there. With the help of the son in law of one of the members and his long suffering wife (who also happens to be a genius with

[up] Clown College 101: Applying Rouge

a theoretical concept of using "Ethereal Currents" to get to Mars) the men joke a lot and get drunk a lot, but will their dreams come true? We're not too sure you'll care. While it can be quite enchanting, the story of obsessed and indulgent old men (and an absence of anything approaching a crafted plot) just isn't that compelling.

But what's that? Yes, it's back to another China adventure to cap the disc off, this one also involving Mars and being a good deal of fun that we don't want to spoil for you. Like we said before, it's a mish mash, but the lack of a real denouement to the main story lets this release down. Still, we like Miss China.
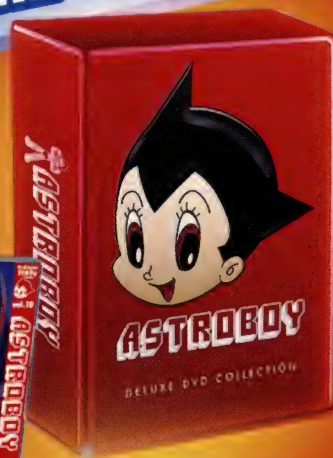**Dirk Watch**

**ANIMATION: 6 / STORY: 4
EXTRAS: 1 / OVERALL: 6**

It's the Wacky Old Men Adventure Wish Show!

The Rise & Fall of the

Ultima

Empire
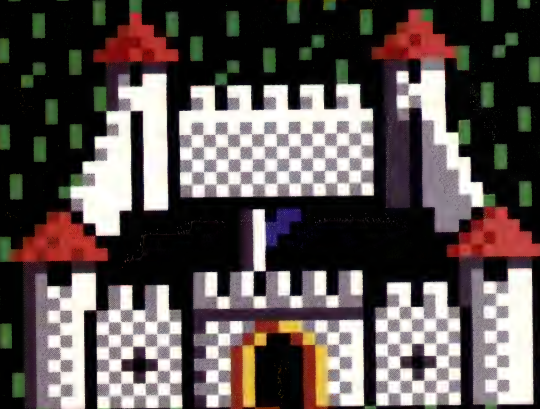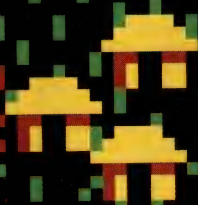
by Alexander Gambotto-Burke

H

ave you ever heard of the Wayfarers? Don't worry. Up until recently, neither had I. Inconspicuously hidden within , the Wayfarers' website won't be making headlines anytime soon. But, as it turns out, they're a pretty interesting bunch. Why? Well, they've dedicated their spiritual lives to pursuing and upholding the eight Virtues of the Avatar, the central and playable character of Richard Garriott's and Origin System's legendary Ultima RPG series.

PRAISE BE TO THE AVATAR

Garriott admits he hasn't heard of them either, but promises to look them up. That said, there's no denying he's a little shocked. And why shouldn't he be? Ultima, after all, was never intended to shape people's spirituality. In fact, its beginnings are as humble as it comes. "You have to understand the context for Akalabeth, which I really consider to be Ultima Zero," he explains. "When I was making it, I was really just doing it for me; it was not meant to be a published product. I was just doing it for myself and my friends."

Whenever his buddies came over for some Dungeons and Dragons, Garriot would whip out his baby, and that was all he ever intended to do with it. That was, until one fateful summer... "During my sophomore year at high school, I worked at a computer store selling Apple][s and some of the other early computers. The owner of that shop was the first person to see me tinkering after hours at my little game, Akalabeth. He said: 'Wow. You know, that game is much better than anything we're selling on the shelves!' So his praise helped me go commercial.

"Back in that time — 1980, to be exact — the state-of-the-art for the packaging for games was a Ziploc bag and Xerox coversheets. So, I spent what I thought

was a huge amount of money — two hundred dollars — and I invested in Ziploc bags and Xerox coversheets. I began to sell them on the peg-board at the store where I worked. Within a few days, we had sold a dozen or so of those copies. I got a call from one of the first few national distributors of software, who'd been given a copy of my game. They called me up and said they'd like to distribute my game nationally. So I signed contracts with them and they sold about 30,000 copies of that game, and if you do the math, my royalties were about five dollars per package. That's about 150,000 dollars. Immediately, my income started to double my dad's income just with something I did as an after-school toy for myself. That's when I said, 'Gee, I should do this intending for people to see it.' That's what started the Ultima series."

The early Ultimas were nothing like the ones in which the Wayfarers have found spiritual guidance - they were an amalgam of ultra-trad fantasy, space combat, even time travel. "Basically," Garriott laughs, "the early Ultimas were anything and everything I thought was fun. There were two elements that were required: I had to think it was fun, and I had to be able to do it. So, you'll notice that the first couple of games included 3D, 2D, as well as space, and on the ground, and in caves. I was a big Star Wars fan and a huge D&D fan. Time Bandits was another influence. The main reason a lot of those things were shook out over time was practicality. For example, my first games were written in BASIC, and it wasn't until Ultima III [1983] that I really began to learn how to write in Assembly language. Until you've really mastered Assembly language, you really can't do 3D dungeon corridors very well. Especially, you can't do 3D outer space justice unless you're a pretty powerful Assembly programmer. When BASIC was satisfactory, I could include anything and everything. Once the power of the machine went up, and I wasn't a master of Assembly, I started to drop out a lot of the 3D stuff and left that to others. That's what encouraged me to go to the tile-graphic structure. And the tile-graphics structure or metaphor worked best with moving around on the

ground. Circumstance drove me in that direction."

Thus, the basic formula for an Ultima game was solidified: fantasy, third-person perspective from an overhead viewpoint, no flying in spaceships. However, almost everything else in the series was always subject to change, be it the storyline, the message, the source code, or even the shape of the land (then known as Sosaria). In fact, as soon as Garriott had really put together the first archetypal Ultima, Ultima III: Exodus, he threw almost everything out the doggie-door. The result? His favourite Ultima to date: 1985's Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar.

If you're not a fan (or a Wayfarer), you might wonder why Quest of the Avatar is so damn special. Well, it all comes down to a little TLC — not in the "come to momma, let me get you some chocolate milk" kind of way, but rather Garriott's three principles of Truth, Love, and Courage (which evolved into the eight Virtues: Honour, Valour, Humility, Compassion, Sacrifice, Spirituality, and Honesty). For the first time in history, an RPG was not about slaying demonlords but about being and embodying good. Of course, Garriott wasn't just doing the game out of altruism; as is often the case in life, he was spurred on by religious fanatics who believed he was encouraging their children to worship the devil.

"Ultima IV wasn't exactly a result of the fanatics," Garriott chuckles, "but it was definitely one of the many mental factors going on at the time when I did it.

> "When I was making it, I was really just doing it for me; it was not meant to be a published product"

[top] Ultima VI, featuring John "hair model" Romero as Frank

To give you a sense of what was occurring: at the very beginning of the series, I was still living at home with my parents. I would definitely have described myself as a young kid. Ultima III was actually the first Ultima that Origin [the studio he formed with his brother, Robert] published. And with its publication came a number of other changes. For example, I moved out of my parents' house for the final time, I bought a home of my own, and built it, and started taking on what you might call more 'adult' responsibilities. It was also the first time I began to see my own what you might call 'fan mail' or 'player mail'. I began to see feedback from the consumers as to what

they saw in my games — what they liked, what they didn't like — and also how they interpreted the games, even though there were no messages in the earlier Ultimas - it was really just about fighting monsters and collecting treasure. And, of course, I did get my share of religious extremist hate-mail."

"More importantly, though, I was struck by what I call the 'moral ambiguity' of most RPGs You're supposed to be a hero, and you know that, because you're told that by the documentation. And you're supposed to kill the bad guy because you're told to by the documentation. Whilst you play the game, most players pillage, plunder, kill, and maim pretty much anybody and

anything they can in order to become powerful enough to go and kill that bad guy. And that bad guy, throughout your playing the game, has done nothing, good or evil. They just sit there, waiting for you to come and kill them.

"After telling that story in the first few games, frankly, I was tired of just repeating it. That's still the story in the vast majority of RPGs even to this day. I finally said, 'Look, I want to do a game that's not so shallow. I want to do a game where you have to pay attention to your actions, and you were really judged upon your deed, not just on the final result of killing the bad guy.' I tried to make it, for example, so my bad guys were active during the gameplay. They did things that made themselves worthy of being considered evil. And the game, as you moved through it, although you were still given the freedom to perform all kinds of deeds, it, just like the real world, remembered your actions. If you go around robbing banks,

"Of course, I did get my share of religious extremist hate-mail"

sooner or later, you're going to get thrown in jail, and I made the same thing true for my virtual world. I felt that made a game that had more relevance and was more meaningful to the players."

Garriott's little gamble turned out beautifully. Was he scared? "Totally. In fact, the first few Ultimas each took me some number of months – up to a year – to create. Ultima IV took me two years, and one of the principle reasons was that I was doing this much more sophisticated game. I had lots of doubts. I was very worried that people would reject it utterly and would think I'd gone off on some moral high-ground kind of thing."

Quite the contrary, lads. Ultima IV ended up being the first number-one in the series.

So where did Garriott go from there? After introducing the world to the Eight Virtues, the Avatar, and an interactive, reactive world, what else was there? Politics. 1988's Ultima V and 1990's VI not only improved on everything in Ultima IV, but they also marked Garriott's debut as a social commentator. "If you look at the story arcs, Ultima IV was the first true attempt at properly introduced good and evil. But then, as soon as I'd done that one, I realize it was pretty clunky: the good guys were pretty obviously good, and the bad guys were clearly bad, and there was nobody in between. So I thought, 'at least the formula worked, but that's not how reality is.' There's a lot of grey. There are a lot of ostensibly good people who are doing it for the wrong reasons, and there're a lot of people who may seem evil but who are just desperate or haven't seen the light. So, that's really the story of Ultima V. It was supposed to be a story that properly described reality. The later Ultimas really did become much more what I'd call attempted social commentary, usually focusing on issues that I saw happening around me at the time.

"If you go back to V, it was a time when a lot of the televangelists in the United States were getting into hot water for all kinds of personal deviations from what they actually preached. So, I used the supposedly good guys with the rotten hearts in the game. I felt that by including contemporary issues that were pretty heavily veiled, I could give relevance to my games. I try to create a story that has issues purposely selected to be relevant."

The Ultima series' growing sophistication helped the games adopt a darker feel. Ultima VI: The False Prophet focused on the persecution of the Gargoyles by Britannians, and reflected real-world themes of racial intolerance and hatred. The dark edges of both Ultima V and VI culminated in the development of what is arguably the most macabre (and one of the best) Ultimas to date: 1992's Ultima VII: The Black Gate. By this point, Garriott admitted he was tired of all the "goody two-shoes stuff."

He pauses, excited. "By the time we got to Ultima VII, I'd had six Ultimas and Akalabeth behind me. And in all of those games, you're the big hero. So even though they'd become more sophisticated,

A rather large, familiar man looks up and sees you. The shock that is evident from his dumbfounded expression quickly evolves into delight.

ultimately, you were still the good guy; ultimately, there was a bad guy, and as long as you walked the straight and narrow path, life was good. People had actually learned that, and IV, V, and VI were already story structures of which I was proud. But I wanted to push the envelope a little further. I wanted to ask, 'Is there ever justification to do things that other people might consider evil?' Is there a cause where even the ultimate good guy — whom you represent — might need to bend their own moral structure? That's what I tried to answer with VII, VIII, and IX. I wanted to present an ever-increasing sophistication of foes and their complexity — in the story sense — but then also to win the game, maybe the straight and narrow path wasn't always right. Maybe you could be allowed to deviate or be forced to deviate from that path. I tried to do those deviations with some delicacy to make sure I wasn't encouraging people to forego their fundamental moral beliefs… but at least toy with them. Some people still felt I'd forced them to perform deeds that they found objectionable, but to some degree, I enjoyed that. It was a fitting next step in the evolution of the storyline."

This time around, Garriott decided to focus his commentator-crosshairs on Tom Cruise's ideological crew. "The Fellowship [the not-so-virtuous spiritual order in Black Gate], and its leader, Batlin, were based on L. Ron Hubbard and Scientology. I find Scientology a fascinating study in belief structures and I have a sizeable collection of their supposedly secretive books. I found them to be a great group to parallel my cultish Fellowship after."

Black Gate also marked Origin's union with Electronic Arts, a bond that would inspire Garriott to create the last (and most powerful) baddie in the Ultima timeline: the large, in-charge, and undeniably Muppet-like Guardian. "While the character of the Guardian was by no means connected to EA," he asserts, "the Sphere, the Cube, and the Tetrahedron — which were the physical devices planted into the world to bring evil amongst the

[top] Ultima VII: The Quest to Find NAMBLA
[above] Ultima VIII - just climb over dude

people — were absolutely chosen because they were the Electronic Arts symbols. What's funny about that, of course, is that Ultima VII, which is where those devices first showed up, was the first product we published as part of EA. And so when we joined, we said, 'Hey, by the way, EA sales and executive group, just so you know, here's our current plan for Ultima VII. Are you offended or do you think this is funny?' And they also thought it was quite funny and were by no means offended, so we went ahead and included it."

Sadly, however, the laughs didn't continue. EA (known as Dollars Money McMoney in certain circles) and its strict production schedules turned the next Ultima — which could have been the most interesting one of all — into a title with more bugs than a police interrogation room. "Ultima VIII: Pagan [1994] is my least favourite of the Ultimas," Garriott laments. "The story for that one goes like this: EA have some things they do really well and things they do not so well. The thing that EA does the best is one-year cycle sports products. They do that masterfully. They manage their public stock well by being a very quarterly-driven business. However, PC games, especially RPGs, take more than a year to develop. They take a couple of years. That doesn't fit the EA mould very well. EA doesn't have much tolerance for games that take a long time to develop and have variable ship dates.

"There was a lot of pressure on me to ship on time, and when you start running out of time, the best thing to do is start cutting features. For the sports games, that was fine. Even as I joined, I believed the EA mantras for the first while. So, I was playing good corporate citizen not because

[top] Ultima IX: Frank Goes to College

I was forced to, but because that was the corporate culture that had led them to so much success. So while I didn't necessarily embrace it, I certainly didn't fight it very much with Ultima VIII. A huge swathe of the play-space was eliminated, so tons of the quests and things just lead you to dead ends because they were never sewn up in a logical and complete fashion."

Unfortunately, this trend was continued into 1999's Ultima IX: Ascension, where the entire gameworld had to be compressed into a very small space, and the original plot dumbed down. Garriott concedes, however, that Ascension's bugs and inconsistencies weren't exactly unique: "If

"EA doesn't have much tolerance for games that take a long time to develop"

you look back at Ultima III, it was a game where, when you talked to people, you typed in the words. If somebody told you about the bears and you typed in 'B-E-A-R-S', they might give you some more information about them. In one instance, you're given clues in the game to go and ask someone about an altar, spelt 'a-l-t-a-r', correctly. The NPC that you go talk to checks for the spelling, 'a-l-t-e-r'. And unless you know how to misspell it the way I misspelled it, Ultima III is utterly unsolvable. Those kinds of inconsistencies existed through all of them, I believe, but it's just that the later you get in the games industry, the more people notice. Also, the Ultimas became more and more complicated, so it was harder to find them."

There was another reason why Origin might have been distracted. For some years, it had dedicated a lot of its resources to a little thing you may refer to in passing as Ultima Online. Apparently, they would've been working on it a lot earlier if it weren't for EA's stubbornness. "It took us about 2-3 years to convince EA to start the game," Garriott remembers. "There had been no big successful online games. The most successful game would've been an AOL product back when they were a dialup service, where they had about a thousand players at a time. Since that was the biggest success in history, which was just a few thousand, EA's sales projections were basically zero. EA uses sales projections to decide on everything they do, and so they basically said, 'forget it.' We kept getting 'no', until after about three years, we said, 'Look - just give us a couple hundred thousand dollars, and we'll prove it to you.' So we took that couple hundred thousand dollars, built a game that used Ultima VI graphics and had very simple gameplay, and we put up a site that said, 'Hey, we're developing this online Ultima game. If you want to help us test it, you need to send us $5 so we can send you a CD.' 50,000 people signed up for that within a week or two. That was so far in excess of the lifetime projections that suddenly, this bastard stepchild of a product became the most important thing in the EA world."

Aside from being the first blockbuster online game — that has retained its popularity to this day - UO also marked a more nostalgic and melancholy development in Origin's history: it was the first time anything in the Ultima continuum had ever looked back on itself. Set roughly between Ultima III and V, UO presented players with the world of Britannia (or Sosaria) as if the Avatar had never returned. As Origin has dissolved and Garriott has gone off to new horizons (namely, the somewhat tongue-in-cheek Destination Games and Tabula Rasa), it looks as if the Avatar truly will never return again, which is why UO, trapped in the past as it is, is so important. Its vast but detailed and inhabited world is a reminder to all gamers what RPGs should be: big and freeform, but still intricate and focused. It also provides that warm, fuzzy feeling that one day, in the distant future, perhaps, the Avatar will come back to save us all. And if he doesn't, give the Wayfarers a call.

MAIL HYPER!

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OPEN ALL ENDS

I realized the other day how open ended games are now the future, as the replay value of these games is so much grater than a liner game, because you can do just about anything. This is especially the case for the Elder Scrolls series, and GTA. For example, when I finally got GTA: San Andreas, (the best game in the world) I realized I was still playing it 12 months after I got it! But other games like Rayman 3 went out after about a month! It makes me think if liner games will be erased out completely soon.

Harry Jackson!

Hi Harry! While we get what you're saying we doubt that "linear" games as you call them will be phased out. As technology progresses we will see more and more open ended games appearing on the market but a solidly linear, non open ended game still has a place, as they can do one thing that open-ended games cannot – tell a cohesive narrative. The strength of linear games is that they can tell a story at the pace the developers want, something impossible in a game that gives the player the freedom to enter and leave the storyline as they please. Plus, the entire industry would come crashing down if everyone was spending 12 months with each game.

PAL PROBLEMS

What did PAL do wrong? Whose sister did we screw to get the anus end of gaming? I have normally just taken our late releases, high prices and delays on the chin but 2k Sports has crossed a line. I am a huge NBA fan and played ESPN NBA 2k5 to death. Upon hearing news of NBA 2k6, I proceeded to find out everything I could about the release date. America got their hands on this game in late September if memory serves me correctly, while ours was scheduled about a month later. That was no biggy. As far as PAL releases go that's not so bad. This release date then got pushed back to December, early January, late February and ended up being finalised at March 10. At least they may update the rosters for PAL release, I thought to myself, they couldn't take this long to just port. Not only did they just port the game to PAL, our version came with errors that weren't even in the NTSC version!

What were they doing in the 5 months other than removing working features?

The first noticeable flaw was when I went to manually rearrange the team rosters (the rate players change teams these days, geez). Not a single player has their colleges listed. Either that or "None" College USA was very freakin popular. In create-a-player, you can't select colleges either.

That's alright, I'll just take the game online and download the roster update from 2k Sports. Not only will this update the rosters with missing players and correct some player positions but it might have their colleges.

When I got online I was welcomed to "NBA 2k6" and informed that there are no downloads for my game, even though NTSC versions have enjoyed the downloads for several months. So, I can't use my game online, I can't select colleges and there is even this dunk glitch where no CPU players seem to dunk despite having high dunk tendencies.

Why, Hyper, why?

As heard on American Dad, I can't even eat the amount I want to vomit.

Adam

It always confuses us when we have to wait months for gimped versions of games. What, we don't know that there's a thing called College basketball? And that whole interweb thing, apparently we're too backwards to get a grip on it. Unfortunately we couldn't tell you why this has happened but that definitely sucks.

OLD LEMON FACE

Moments ago I finished Max Payne 2: The fall of Max Payne. One word. Wow. What a brilliant game. Recently I had began to lose interest in the single player side of most games and although I was buying more than ever, they only held my interest for a couple of hours at most. The fall of Max Payne renewed my love, the incredible gunfights made my heart race, the love story and its conclusion nearly brought me to tears. The polish in Max Payne 2 is as close to a movie that I have ever seen in a game.

I hope this letter reminds everyone of why we play games, cos they rock!

Max Payne 2 is now really cheap so buy it because I want a sequel

P.S On the subject of sequals, any word of a Crimson Skies for 360?

Luke. G

Hi Luke – wow, that's a bit of a blast from the past. We totally agree though, Max Payne 2 was an awesome game with a huge amount of polish. There's no word of a sequel that we know of – the team are currently working on Alan Wake and we'll bring you lots of new info on that in the next issue or two - but there's a fairly good chance that we will see one at some stage due to the success of the first two games. As far as a sequel to Crimson Skies goes, unfortunately it's pretty unlikely, but we're keeping our fingers crossed.

MR CRANKY

This letter is solely for Sir Daniel Wilks. Wilks, i could kiss you! Why? Because, if it wasnt for you, i never would have bought the fantastic little RPG Atelier Iris. I noticed that it was in your top 5 games of the month list a couple of issues ago. I figured: if a hard-to-please, cranky old sod like wilks likes it, it must be ok! So i went out and bought the game and im loving it! Little did i know that you would review the game in the very next issue of Hyper, albeit with a rather low score. Any way, my rant is over.

Thank the heavens we have Wilks. Long live the Wilks! Huzzah! Huzzah!
concrete donkey

The reason for the low score was the lack of any real progression at later levels – characters didn't really advance and encounters just became longer and more specific rather than more difficult. Aside from that the game is still a very charming and fun little RPG.

NOW WITH HAMILL

I've just finished reading the top ten anime game wish list, I wanted to add one of my own. Do you remember an old anime called The Guyer? It was reviewed back in the old Hyper days and you guys thought it was as good as I did. I've heard that they have gone beyond episode 12 now and there are new, bigger Guyver things (it's always sold out at my local importer). Do you remember this great series, and have you seen the newer ones?

Keep up the good work lads,
Hellzuub 60 mage Hyjal

It's been a long time since we saw The Guyver. There are 26 episodes of The Guyver but to the best of our knowledge only the first 12 were released here by Manga Entertainment (now Madman). As far as we know they were never released on DVD, only on video so your best bet for finding them now would be a trip to your local Chinatown/Asian DVD shop. You may also want to check out the live action films Mutazoids and Guyver: Dark Hero. David Hayter who plays the Guyver in Dark Hero is also responsible for voicing Solid Snake and writing the first two X-Men movies.

CAPTION THIS!

Andrew Ross gave us the biggest guffaws this month with this stellar entry...

PART 78 WINNER

And then, in a shower of power stars;
Mario turned into a real boy.

GLAD TO HELP

There have been plenty of studies recently to suggest that gaming can have positive effects on your health, due to its ability to reduce stress. Of course, we all knew this to be the case anyway, but I just felt I had to share a personal story with you about how games helped me through a particularly stressful time in my life.

Earlier this year my father had to have open heart surgery in Perth. Owing to our living in the country, this necessitated the whole family staying there for a couple of weeks. Unfortunately the whole thing went spectacularly pear-shaped. My father was in ICU for three weeks, avoiding death by only the narrowest of margins.

Suddenly I was divorced from all contact with home. I had no PC, no internet, none of my enormous Next Gaming magazine collection, no beloved Gamecube or my newly acquired Xbox. Thankfully I did have my DS on hand, and had bought a copy of American Sk8land and Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones just before it all went sour.

I spent the next seven weeks having the worst experience of my short life. Everything that could go wrong, did. My disabled brother had to go to hospital in an ambulance, our car was stolen from, we were abused and ripped off by several people, and even had to buy a house at the drop of a hat. And that's not even the full story!

Anyway, during this time my DS was my only escape from the chaotic madness of the real world. Every chance I had, I'd whip it out and enter into my own little gaming nirvana, cutting off all other distractions. Whether it was entering a zen-like state performing progressively more ridiculous Tony Hawk combos (Current best: 8,754,756 points on Alcatraz), or obsessively trying to complete every mission on Fire Emblem without a single casualty (no mean feat, believe me), gaming provided me with an invaluable escape.

I'm not even going to start on the perennial debate over whether games have a positive or negative effect on people. I can only tell you that I have enjoyed gaming for my entire life, and during that time it was truly a lifesaver. And that's precisely the point. Even from the depths of despair, gaming gave me something else to think about. It gave me a reprieve from the cruel world just when I needed it.

And if it can do that for me, it can do that for anyone. Thankyou for listening. Kind regards from your loyal fan,
Ian Casey
Ninty Fanboy
Rebel With Too Many Causes™

After all the arguments we see on a regular basis it's nice to see someone not trying to drive a point into the ground but instead detailing a personal experience. We're sorry for what happened to your family but your letter has bought a smile to our collective faces, and no doubt to the faces of any developers who may be reading the magazine!

WE WANT GOO!

Just wanted to let you know that I really enjoyed reading the feature on all the best and worst review scores from previous issues – it really got the nostalgic bug in me excited. It gave me some ideas too. I think it would be terrific if Hyper were to release another cover CD, only this time it would be full of all of the past reviews, everyone of them. And not just the scores, but the whole review, text and piccies included! It'd be fantastic to check out reviews on old games to see if they still hold true, plus it'd be a great compilation to have. And it would be cool if you were to release a new one once a new, so as to update this review anthology.

So what do you think? Shall we go and get that lovable Korean fellow, Amos, and set him to work in the sweat-shops on what's sure to be a hit with the fans.

Oh, and if you do happen to do it, don't forget to send it to us subscribers too!
Cheers, Patrick

Awesome idea but unfortunately doing a compilation of all of the reviews that Hyper has ever done would be nigh on impossible. Due to changes in technology, locations, backup media, robberies and the like we don't have a good deal of the archive stored on any type of digital backup. It would be possible to scan all of the issues but the logistics of such a task would be atrocious as each page would have to be scanned, colour corrected and retouched to make them readable. We'd love to be able to do something like that but with the current level of resources
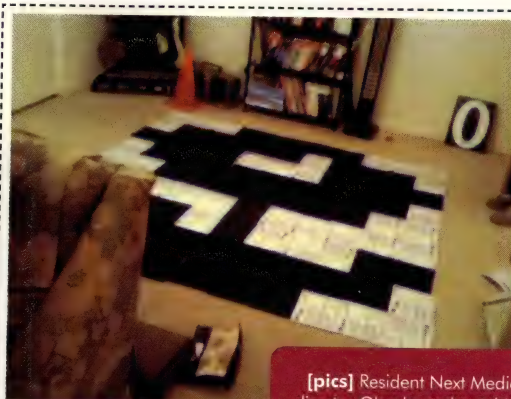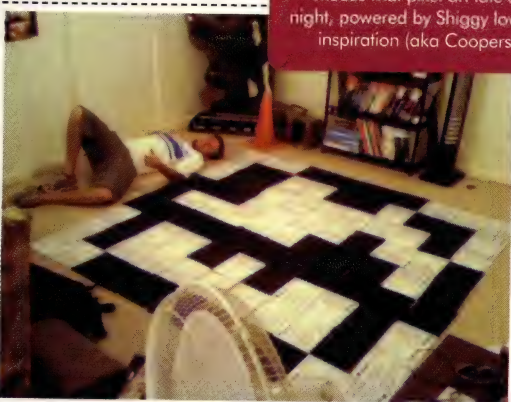
we have it would be unfeasible. BTW, Amos no longer works with us. He turned traitor and now does the art for poker machines.

WHAT HE SAID

War what it is good for! Long time reader, first time writer. I just wanted give a point of view from this old time sage of 28 years. With the ensuing scaling down production of new dazzling titles for Xbox I found my eye wandering to the handheld market for portable fun. I have been perusing many forums for views on both PSP and DS, and most of the time it's an all out war of PSP-ophiles ear bashing DS-ophiles and vice versa. Maybe it's my EXP level talking but I view this as the biggest waste of time since the Duke Nukem Forever web site. Why does it have to be one handheld or the other? Yes I have had many console's and pc's over my time and had many hours of tearful joy from keeping my helicopter aloft in Alex the kid to getting a set of wooden teeth to bring down those Damn tentacles!. All I ask is consider WHAT TYPE OF GAMES DO YOU WANT TO PLAY, irrespective of who the manufacture is. In my situation I got a DS. I want to play uncommon (dare I say quirky) games like Mario & Luigi : Partners in Time, Meteos, Advance wars even Phoenix Wright. and

then you have a wealth of GB Advance Library like Gunstar Super Hero's or Fire Emblem. So just remember it's the games that make memories not the system it's played on, do your homework and if you cannot understand why people buy a system you dislike remember put away your harshly worded forum entries and remember crates are the same on any system, its how you use them that makes the difference.
DILSWA +28 EXP

Well said that man!

L33T BE GONE!

After reading Hyper for years, it's time for me to write to you. This is a genuine thank you note for what i believe to be a just cause. If one of your writers (hopefully a sarcastic one) reads this and feels happier – then my job is done. I'm talking about the endless babbling of semi-illiterate whiners who believe the pinnacle of vocab evolution is the placement of an '8' in the stead of 'ate'- you all know what i'm talking about- leave the l33t speak for the damn mmorpgs so we can /ignore you and never be subject to such crap. Dont poison magazine mail sections! Wilks' response to the letter "Short Bus", from issue #152 reminds me of the good old days, when sarcasm and wit reigned supreme and foolish, lazy fanboys with room temperature IQs were shot down and embarrassed for the entertainment of the rest of us. Long live the healthy competition of all next gen consoles- which reminds me- which would you choose if you prefer single player gaming rather than over a subscription service out of x360 and PS3? Dont get me wrong, multiplayer is awesome (cant wait for NWN2, but WoW will suffice for now) but i dont think I'll bother with a console online subscription service and i can't recall this question being asked before.

Thanks for the fun.
Rob S.

Wilks says that flattery will get you everywhere. On to your question, it's still too early to judge. We'll do a head to head when PS3 launches.

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www.hyper.com.au Come and join us on the forums!

The Passion of the Gamer
THE ONLINE EXPLORER
By Dylan Burns

The internet. It's pretty cool huh? You can look up pretty much anything you want, become lost for hours in pages and pages of useless information, not to mention learn how to 'delete history' faster than the best hacker known. So why is it that whenever I log into the online world it seems smaller than ever? You see, I've noticed a pattern with my online habits. I generally only visit the same handful of sites (which sites are not important because my girlfriend may read this) and I'm left wondering why the endless possibilities of the net leave me feeling like a rabbit caught in the headlights of an oncoming road train.

I could chalk it down to my being limited to dial-up, a necessary saving required to fuel my gaming passion, but somehow this doesn't ring true. If I really want to look up something I'll quite happily click on it and go off and do something else while it downloads. I also understand the importance of having so much information available at the click of a button and certainly I would not be a gameboffin without such quick and at-hand knowledge.

Perhaps then my explorative reticence comes from the fact that I am one of those rare creatures who remembers a world without the internet, where things called libraries were regular ports of call for info-philes. Sticky seats, yellowed pages, old book smell, barely muted farts – ah, libraries... But no, I doubt even these reminiscent memories are what makes me such an inertial online being. Don't get me wrong, I like the internet and love having sites where I feel part of a community, where I know the people posting on forums. It fulfills the basic human need to be heard and appreciated - or reviled and loathed as the case may be.

Part of me actually wonders what I'm missing out on when I stay 'local' and rarely explore outside of my own online boundaries – perhaps hours and hours of delving through obscure threads, tracking down that tiny bit of new game information or rare developer interview. However the need for me to do so is made obsolete because others will do so long before my snail-like connection even loads the first page. I can reap the rewards of their efforts far more easily.

It may also be because, let's face it, there's a heck of a lot of crap out there. Long have debates raged over whether e-zines are better than their paper cousins. Online, every nerd with a penchant for writing about themselves (yes I am aware of the irony of that statement) becomes an expert at critique. There's no rigorous training needed, minimal editorial presence and some online pages are just clutter. The one advantage that online formats have over paper is the fact that information is instantaneous.

However I would argue that the high standards offered by many magazines (including the one in your dirty mitts) are what will keep them relevant for many years to come. Rather than some fourteen year old writing up a review of Super Taco Fighting 7 in his spare time, professional magazines offer the combined efforts of journalists and writers whose job it is to be concise and informative and whom readers entrust to critically analyse their chosen field.

FIG 1. *Mind how ye go, there be rough seas ahead*

But enough soap boxing - back to the sense of community thing because it offers an interesting analogy. Perhaps humans naturally feel safer and comforted in a close community and fearful of outside or alien landscapes. Although the internet is an interesting nowhere-yet-everywhere creature, the fact that I stick closely to my bookmarks and rarely venture outside after dark points to an inherent human behaviour. Sure I could nonchalantly go looking through obscure and esoteric sites, and that can be quite fun, but it won't be long before I fall back into the comforting arms of my few bookmarked sites. Hiking up into the unknown wilds is exhilarating for a while, but it's great to get home and put your feet up. In fact, the sheer volume of information available becomes a metaphorical mountain that seems impossible to traverse, so at times it seems better not to try at all.

Of course there are those of you who will raise your eyebrows quizzically and have no idea what I'm on about – you have conquered your fears and are true online explorers. Good on you. I am happy to let you do the exploring and report to me your findings; happy to be at the bottom of the funnel, the receiver of filtered information that is devoid of all the crap you had to wade through to get to it. You are the true heroes of this age.

And now with online gaming and the delivery of games through services such as Steam gaining, well, steam, us dial-up dinosaurs are set to face the coming broadband tsunami with as much equanimity as we can muster. Who knows, in a few years the days of owning a physical copy of a game may be looked upon as quaint and a waste of plastic and cardboard. The possibilities for online gaming may even force solitary gamers to reconsider their eschewal of online companionship. We passionate gamers cannot just ignore this trend, where disparate gamers are brought together in an environment of competition, slandering and noob bagging.

Our common love for games may even tempt us to don our travel cloaks and explore the internet wasteland with all its inherent dangers, discovering those few serene groves of sanctuary scattered throughout the net. If you become lost, your bookmarks become like scatterings of breadcrumbs, a sure path back home that you can follow at any time, a safe route.

Where does all this lead? Perhaps shy online gamers need to be treated with more care. They are after all putting their fears on the line and testing the waters with their newfound courage. And as they become enveloped by online gaming culture and learn all the associated jargon, they in turn will be able to lead other wary travelers into the friendly arms of their respective communities. That would be quite lovely, wouldn't it?

Actually, now that I read over my own convoluted words, I'm thinking of getting broadband at last - to keep with the times. Know any good sites?

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Next Issue:

Hideo Kojima on Metal Gear Solid 4

We talk to one of the most legendary game designers of all time about taking old man Snake onto the PS3...

PLUS: E3 2006 Part 2 - An absolutely huge preview section brimming with hands-on reports and interviews.
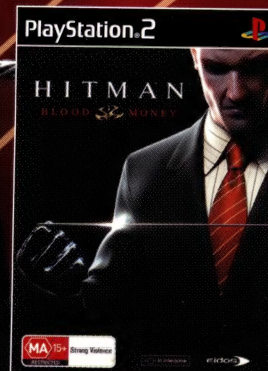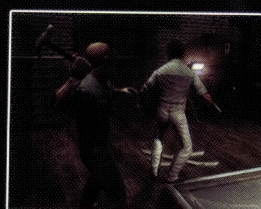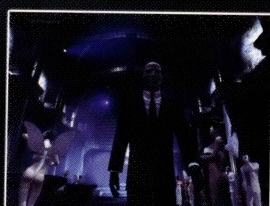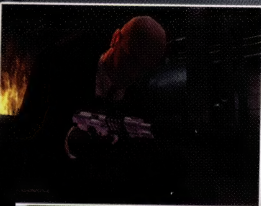
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